

# FIELD

I keep laughing and laughing all night  
For I see on the earth such fun,  
I wouldn't be kept out of sight,  
No, not to change berths with the sun!





# FIELD

CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND POETICS  
NUMBER 17 — FALL 1977

PUBLISHED BY OBERLIN COLLEGE  
OBERLIN, OHIO

EDITORS    *Stuart Friebert*  
              *David Young*

ASSOCIATE    *Patricia Ikeda*  
EDITORS    *David St. John*  
              *Alberta Turner*

EDITORIAL    *Reina Calderon*  
ASSISTANT

COVER    *Steve Farkas*

*FIELD* gratefully acknowledges support from the Ohio Arts Council, the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines, Laurence Perrine, and Ann Moyer Seaman.

Published twice yearly by Oberlin College.

Subscriptions: \$4.00 a year / \$7.00 for two years / Single issues \$2.00 postpaid. Back issues 1-9; 11-14: \$10.00. Issue 10 is out of print. Issues 15 & 16 are still available at \$2.00 each.

Subscription orders and manuscripts should be sent to *FIELD*, Rice Hall, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio 44074. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Copyright © 1977 by Oberlin College.



## CONTENTS

Zbigniew Herbert	5	<i>The Ardennes Forest</i>
	7	<i>A Little Box Called Imagination</i>
Larry Levis	8	<i>For Zbigniew Herbert, Summer, 1971, Los Angeles</i>
	9	<i>Words for the Axe</i>
	10	<i>The Future of Hands</i>
C. D. Wright	13	<i>Woman Looking through a Viewmaster</i>
	14	<i>Amnesiac</i>
	15	<i>The End at the Bathhouse</i>
Leslie Rondin	17	<i>Come Put Your Hand</i>
	18	<i>Heraclitus</i>
Linda Gregerson	19	<i>Rain</i>
Mark Jarman	20	<i>Required Mysteries</i>
	22	<i>My Parents Have Come Home Laughing</i>
Debra Bruce	23	<i>For Bad Grandmother and Betty Bumhead</i>
Steve Orlen	24	<i>The Question Was</i>
Franz Wright	25	<i>St. Paul's Greek Orthodox Church Minneapolis, 1960</i>
David Huddle	26	<i>Theory</i>
	27	<i>Words</i>
	28	<i>Them</i>
	29	<i>Vermont</i>
Jim Heynen	30	<i>Bloating and Its Remedies</i>
	31	<i>Who Kept Her Hand in Her Pocket</i>
	32	<i>The Boys Go to Ask a Neighbor for Some Apples</i>
Anne Marie Macari	33	<i>Burial Mound</i>
	34	<i>Counting the Years</i>
	35	<i>After the Rain</i>

Beth Tornes	36	<i>Sleep</i>
	37	<i>Nocturnal</i>
Margaret Atwood	38	<i>Night Poem</i>
Tanikawa Shuntarō	39	<i>I See a Woman</i>
Charles Wright	46	<i>Charles Wright at Oberlin</i>
	86	<i>Mount Caribou at Night</i>
Philip Booth	87	<i>Rates</i>
Jan Haagensen	89	<i>Flock</i>
	91	<i>Chicken Wings</i>
Philip Levine	93	<i>Why I'm Not Making My Last Trip Now</i>
	94	<i>Little by Little</i>
Nancy Willard	96	<i>Two Allegorical Figures</i>
	97	<i>The Generous Body</i>
	98	<i>The Photographer Gives the Moon a Dark Room</i>
Greg Pape	99	<i>A Man in the Street</i>
	100	<i>The Light</i>
	102	<i>Contributors</i>

THE ARDENNES FOREST

Fold your hands like this in order to absorb sleep  
just like a seed absorbs water  
and the forest will arrive: a green cloud  
the trunk of a birch tree like a chord of light  
and a thousand eyelids will begin to flutter  
in the lost language of leaves  
at that time you'll forget the white morning  
when you waited for the gates' opening

you know that a bird unlocks this region  
it sleeps in a tree and the tree is in the ground  
but here is the spring of new questions  
and currents of evil roots underfoot  
so examine the pattern of the bark on which  
a chord of music tightens  
a lute player who adjusts his pegs  
so that what is silent might sound

brush the leaves aside: a strawberry bush  
the dew on a blade of grass a comb  
the wing of a yellow damsel fly  
and an ant buries his sister  
higher above the treacheries of the deadly nightshade  
a wild pear tree ripens sweetly  
so not expecting greater rewards  
sit down under a tree

fold your hands like this in order to absorb memory  
the shrivelled seed of forgotten names  
so again the forest: a charred cloud  
a forehead stained with black light  
and a thousand eyelids closed shut  
narrowly on eyeballs that don't move  
a tree felled by wind  
the betrayed trust of empty shelters

and that forest is for us for you  
the dead also ask for fairy tales  
for a handful of herbs for the water of memories  
so after the litter of pine needles after the rustling  
and after the tender threads of aromas  
it is nothing that a branch can stop you  
that a shadow can lead you along winding trails  
but you'll find our Ardennes Forest again  
and you'll unlock it



## A LITTLE BOX CALLED IMAGINATION

Tap your finger on a wall —  
a cuckoo  
will jump out  
from a block of wood

it summons trees  
one and another  
until a forest  
stands

whistle shrilly —  
until a river begins to flow  
a firm thread  
that binds mountains with valleys

clear your throat significantly —  
here is a city  
with one tower  
with a gap-toothed wall  
and little yellow huts  
like dice

now  
close your eyes  
snow will fall  
and snuff  
the green flames of the trees  
the red tower

under the snow  
it's night  
with a shining clock on the summit  
the owl of the landscape

*translated by John Pijewski*

FOR ZBIGNIEW HERBERT,  
SUMMER, 1971, LOS ANGELES

No matter how hard I listen, the wind speaks  
One syllable, which has no comfort in it —  
Only a rasping of air through the dead elm.

\*

Once a poet told me of his friend who was torn apart  
By two pigs in a field in Poland. The man  
Was a prisoner of the Nazis, and they watched,  
He said, with interest and a drunken approval.  
If terror is a state of complete understanding,

Then there was probably a point at which the man  
Went mad, and felt nothing, though certainly  
He understood everything that was there: after all,  
He could see his blood beneath him on the stubble,  
He could hear singing float toward him from the barracks.

\*

And though I don't know much about madness,  
I know it lives in the thin body like a harp  
Behind a rib cage. It makes it painful to move,  
And when you kneel in madness your knees are glass,  
And so you must stand up again with great care.

\*

Maybe this wind was what he heard in 1941.  
Maybe I have raised a dead man into this air,  
And now I will have to bury him inside my body,  
And breathe him in, and do nothing but listen —  
Until I hear the black blood rushing over  
The stone of my skull, and believe it is music.

But some things are not possible on the earth.  
And that is why people make poems about the dead.  
And the dead watch over them, until they are finished:  
Until their hands feel like glass on the page,  
And snow collects in the blind eyes of statues.

## WORDS FOR THE AXE

Each day I go further into the woods.  
They fall before me like a road  
Without stars, and without a curve.  
It goes on to the ocean, now.

And at night I fly so deeply into myself  
I become still. I shine under the moon  
Like the lost child you glimpse  
Beneath the ice on the one day of the year  
You decide to go skating.

Whoever it is that holds me, my one friend,  
Is only a flowing of blood:  
And blood spreads like branches in summer,  
The leaves shading a house where the people  
Sleep, and the birds keep their distance  
From other birds, and it is the world.

It is the world — and where the ground was hard  
I helped bury its dead,  
Hacking past rocks and roots until  
I found a place, even for them.  
There is no moral to my story.  
From the outset, I gleamed, like a sea.

## THE FUTURE OF HANDS

All winter  
The trees held up their silent hives  
As if they mattered.  
But on one main street of bars and lights,  
I watched a woman who had begged for days  
Throw all the coins back, insulted,  
Into the crowd,  
And then each cheap stone on her necklace,  
As if they were confetti  
At a bitter wedding,  
And then her stained blouse.  
I smiled then, at her dignity.  
But when the night came  
With only its usual stars to show,  
She was applauded and spat on,  
Or those passing stepped around her  
Avoiding her body  
As if it had become private, or pure.  
When the police arrived,  
Sniveling about the cold day she had chosen  
To strip,  
Her face was a brown jewel,  
And I knew the hands  
Of the police would have to close now,  
On this body abandoned to wind,  
Just as her hands closed, finally,  
On wind that would have nothing  
To do with her,  
And never had.

\*

I know that wind  
Had nothing to do with longing.  
I have seen that, even in the eyes  
Of girls across a lunch counter —

A desire to be anywhere that wasn't  
Texas, and waiting on tables,  
Their eyes making a pact  
With the standing, staring wheat  
About to be turned back into the black soil  
That spreads everywhere when no one  
Is watching.

And writing this,  
I stare at my hands,  
Which are the chroniclers of my death,  
Which pull me into this paper  
Each night, as onto a bed of silk sheets  
And the woman gone.

After two hours of work,  
I do not know if there ever was a woman.

I watch the flies buzz at the sill.

\*

Or, if I sleep,  
I must choose between two dreams.

In one of them,  
My hands move calmly  
Over a girl's waist, or lift  
In speech the way birds rise or settle  
Over a marsh, over nesting places.

In the other dream,  
There are no nesting places.  
The birds are white, and scavenging.  
They lift negligently over the town in wind,  
Like paper, like the death of paper.  
They dip and rise



As if there had never been a heaven.  
Beneath them, it is summer.  
It is the same town I was born in.  
And in its one bar  
The man selling illegal human hair from Mexico,  
The hair of brides mixed  
With the hair of the dead,  
Argues all day over the price.

WOMAN LOOKING THROUGH A VIEWMASTER

She was going on the bus he could see  
between the buttons her breast quiver like the light  
on the wedding knife she said she and the wandering jew  
needed water and sun he never said Stay  
The room in midtown cost ninety it was near the zoo  
late at night she heard the big cats complain  
If she played her horn before breakfast the brakeman  
threw dirty books at her door she tied her kimono  
and cut her bangs crooked watching von Nowak  
pick the leaves off his hood he scrubbed the tires  
with a toothbrush she hung in a hammock  
Her toe dragged the dirt  
The man who could see the light would be going  
to work he wore summer khakis  
a mechanical pencil on his ear he drank  
V-8 his hair was the kind you didn't have to comb  
it felt like a woman's so did his back  
The waitress wants him if those days weren't over  
she'd get a motion picture contract  
Then if the woman hadn't got off the bus  
she could be in TerreBonne Parish  
playing a squeezebox eating red peppers living  
in a stilt house learning to make gumbo praying  
to Saint Anne to get rid of her sty one night  
she'd go home with a trapper named Clothilde  
a fleet of children would pass in pirogues singing  
nous sommes tout seul and the song sends the girl  
mending mosquito net to the Holiday Magazine  
that leaves her where she can cut a star into the ice

## AMNESIAC

*for Sonnyman, third cousin, disappeared eighteen years ago*

We cleared the table for cards  
when the power came back on  
The man stood outside the door  
combing water through his hair  
Forgive me he said  
I think I've come far  
and lost my calling  
After that he drew three jacks  
After that he worked harder than a Shaker  
though he seemed to sleep always  
never going to bed  
We found the Lincoln in the reservoir  
the plates rusted off  
The man said it's a shame  
and headed the tractor home  
When he realized he could tune the upright  
he went up the loft  
with the viewmaster  
He held it to the moon  
The reel he liked to look at is A Visit To Taj Mahal

## THE END AT THE BATH HOUSE

Your life is a note  
you don't want anyone to see  
So you hide it under a mattress

So you forget where it is  
she thinks as she turns the Hungarian  
over on her stomach

Next stall  
old man lost his soap  
nothing on but his hearing aid  
She turns that off  
cleans out his good ear  
Soap floats up between his legs  
He can't hear her call him Fool

She gets a phone call it's somebody  
wants to know did she find his bowtie  
She wanted it to be the one in the combo  
He kept better time

Sunlight comes in the transom  
She sinks down on her knees  
and pulls the hair out of the drains  
She's through

She passes by the forty tubs  
like someone counting beds in a private home  
She goes behind a screen  
painted with a snowcapped mountain  
and lies down on a massage table

Her dark belly falls  
like the bread no one has kneaded  
She thinks about mornings sad as windows  
clothes that never get worn

the household where the oldest son pours  
cream for the rest

She remembers getting her first pair of glasses  
She was seven and she saw Mister Bijou  
levitate on stage



COME PUT YOUR HAND

Come put your hand  
into my blue one, powder blue.  
There's so much left to pretend;

begin with your loved ones:  
set them in orbit  
around the star that is your heart.

Now make your childhood bloom:  
the sorcerer's ring on your finger,  
the stable of faithful creatures.

Keep going, the orange berries  
you scoop from the ground,  
glimpsing Aztec civilization,

the rain — a filmy gown  
you're wading through  
to the window at the end —

a bucking bed,  
a grin that burrows through your dreams. . .

Something's wrong,  
it's the morning you woke up seasick  
moving toward *God knows what*,  
alone in the flickering room.

— That gesture that mimics departure,  
your departure,  
waving *Goodbye to the rosy beach*.

## HERACLITUS

1.

A man crosses a river, spends time on the other side, crosses again that evening. Secretly the waters have changed, wind has displaced some leaves. *Another river* does not occur to the man, still enjoying the afternoon wine of old acquaintance. And it hardly occurs to the goat stirring the water with slender legs: *this drink is like no other.*

2.

The man's life is bodied in strong ribs, an unbruised surface. A hand extended in greeting, shoulders back. The comfort of linear movement. A stone mile distances his farmlands from the twisting fields at earth's imagined center. Terror, then, when a wind ignites straw-lined pockets of the landscape.

3.

Heraclitus in his bright room. His hand constantly moving to find passage through falling timber. Dim guesses. Then: a clearing. A moment to rest in the grass before the flame swoops in, changing the afternoon drone. By the time it arrives he's gone — a fragment bending the page like a string bent to a hidden harmony.

RAIN

You wait and sometimes the gutters fill.  
Rust freshens. This is the spider that crawled up the

spout. This is the water that bit her.  
A shuttlecock lies in the drainpipe, its feathers drenched.

The set was a gift from friends too old to play.  
By now you know the soft parts of the lawn

and the rents in the net. When your sister will,  
you play past dark, you can't see the bird

till it drops, perfect weight, on your racket.  
Nor can you see her. The sound

might be her breath or her shoes in the grass.  
She forgives you, she never stops.

REQUIRED MYSTERIES

My body must be fitted to them.  
Chimneys and the smell of smoked fish,  
Too, are the brain's light.  
My hand pokes from a sleeve  
Covered with raspberry stains.  
I can hold it before me only  
An instant; it's bored; it reaches elsewhere.

I can force others to form  
Like smoke caught in a jar.  
In the kitchen, Mother  
Stirs a jam pot, muffled;  
The steam reddens her blurred hands.  
Outside it is either of the year's  
Two weathers: grayness or cold sunlight,  
And the window is a page of frost.

All light. The beds to be made  
In mid-sea among effigies.  
There are two seeings within,  
Both spring like a trap  
From the usualness of one moment  
To struggle, to limp, squinting.

One thing will not be fixed.  
Light pushes off from it  
Or slips past it; it is not  
Without its visionary pattern  
Like a potato in its earth  
Or the pale celery heart of red rhubarb,

But nakeder. It's a girl,  
Half concerned, pleased to be naked  
And unseen, to stand away  
From the brambles, the bracken, sure of herself,  
Exhausting my quick turns and fakes;  
Like everything I have not remembered,  
Frantically happy that she could  
Be come upon and won't be.



## MY PARENTS HAVE COME HOME LAUGHING

My parents have come home laughing  
From the feast for Robert Burns, late, on foot.  
They have leaned against graveyard walls,  
Have bent double in the glittering frost,  
Their bladders heavy with tea and ginger.  
Burns, suspended in a drop, is flicked away  
As they wipe their eyes, and is not offended.

What could offend him? Not the squeaking bagpipe  
Nor the haggis which, when it was sliced, collapsed  
In a meal of blood and oats  
Nor the man who read a poem by Scott  
As the audience hissed embarrassment  
Nor the principal speaker whose topic  
"Burns' View of Crop Rotation" was intended  
For farmers, who were not present,  
Nor his attempt to cover this error, reciting  
The only Burns poem all evening,  
"Nine Inch Will Please a Lady," to thickening silence.

They drop their coats in the hall,  
Mother first to the toilet, then Father,  
And then stand giggling at the phone  
Debating a call to the States, decide no,  
And the strength to keep laughing breaks  
In a sigh. I hear, as their tired ribs  
Press together, their bedroom door not close  
And hear also a weeping from both of them  
That seems not to be pain, and it comforts me.

FOR BAD GRANDMOTHER AND BETTY BUMHEAD

They lived with us forever  
on weekends. But our grandmother's  
blackberry cake couldn't fool us —  
We knew a mother's mother was  
a witch, and loved her mouth  
to crumple when we took her teeth  
from the bedroom jar and clamped  
them under her rocker.

The winter night she went outside  
in her apron, we followed and tripped  
up her broom until she swatted us,  
but she kept on sweeping snow  
that kept on falling.

And who was Betty, mother's friend  
who moved in with her smells and  
no husband? The boys didn't care  
but my sister and I slid under  
the guest bed to see her undress.  
So easy to judge, those grown ladies.  
Small waisted, she reached up to swab  
her dark roots in the mirror, and we  
squealed when the drugstore bottles  
foamed and spit.

The closet ticks with loose  
hangers as I turn to the bed  
with these old cloth robes,  
cloth buttons. My sister and I  
fold them into my mother's boxes  
and carry them out to the car.  
There's dust on my fingers —  
That year I would have blown  
it at her and chased her back  
to the house. But now we're just  
walking back, not looking  
at one another, not holding hands.

THE QUESTION WAS

Who was I that I couldn't run with my brothers  
Through nets of syringas and sink  
My teeth in the warm she-goat. Cougar,

We thought, her neck broken on the creosote.  
"Don't look," my wife warned, knowing my fear  
Of hurt things. Next day our neighbor shot

A yearling bear drinking our other goat.  
I didn't see him skin or take the meat  
For thanks. All summer the question was

Who broke the net around our house and took  
Two goats who for two summers  
Followed us on walks and gave us milk.

ST. PAUL'S GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH  
MINNEAPOLIS, 1960

There are times I can still  
sense the congregation  
all around me, whispering  
to the one who raised the dead;  
the one whose own  
pulse had ceased, and yet returned  
from the grave.

His face above  
in the high  
enormously bright golden dome  
of the ceiling:  
the face of Christ,  
so different  
from the human

face of Jesus clenched  
with agony,  
or the beautiful Lord  
of Hieronymus Bosch,  
bearing the cross  
in his sleep. . .  
Each Sunday morning

my quiet lost mother  
brought me among them there;  
they were mostly old people  
on canes, and some I remember  
were blind: all of them dead  
by now, in their Father's mansion  
under the grass. . .

## THEORY

Everybody dug a hole and lived in it  
when Division first cleared the land near Cu Chi.  
Snipers kept the men low a while, but then tents  
went up, then big tents. Later, frames of wood, screen  
wire siding, and plywood floors rose under those tents,  
and that was called a hooch. Time I got there,  
base camp was five square miles of hooches, not  
a sniper round was fired in daylight, and good posture

was common. What we wanted was a tin roof.  
I was there the day we got the tin to do it with,  
blistering hot even that morning we stripped off  
the old canvas, took hammers and climbed the rafters  
to nail down sheets of tin. Drinking beer afterwards,  
we were the sweaty survivors, we were the fit.



## WORDS

What did those girls say when you walked the strip  
of tin shack bars, gewgaw stores, barber shops,  
laundries and restaurants, most all of which  
had beds in back, those girls who had to get up  
in Saigon before dawn to catch their rides to Cu Chi,  
packed ten to a Lambretta, chattering, gay  
in their own lovely tongue, on the dusty  
circus road to work, but then what did they say?

*Come here, talk to me, you handsome, GI,  
I miss you, I love you too much, you want  
short time, go in back, I don't care, I want  
your baby, sorry about that, GI,  
you number ten. A history away,  
I translate dumbly what those girls would say.*

## THEM

Sergeant Dieu, frail Vietnamese man,  
once sat down with me, shirtless, on my bunk  
and most astonishingly in my opinion,  
not his, squeezed a pimple on my back.  
My first trip to the field, I saw Vietnamese  
infantry troops, loaded with combat gear,  
walking the paddy dikes and holding hands.  
I was new then. I thought they were queer.

Co Ngoc at the California Laundry  
wouldn't say any of our words, but she  
explained anyway a Vietnamese treatment  
for sore throat: over where it's sore inside  
you rub outside until that hurts too. That  
way won't work for American pain. I've tried.

## VERMONT

I'm thirty-five. I was twenty-three then.  
I'm here with what I've dreamed or remembered.  
In the Grand Hotel in Vung Tau one weekend  
I spent some time with the most delicate  
sixteen-year-old girl who ever delivered  
casual heartbreak to a moon-eyed GI.  
I am trying to make it balance, but I  
can't. Believe me, I've weighed it out:

rising that morning up to the cool air where  
the green land moved in its own dream down there,  
and I was seeing the whole flight back to Cu Chi  
a girl turning her elegant face away  
after I'd said all I had to say.  
This was in Viet Nam. Who didn't love me.

## BLOATING AND ITS REMEDIES

One night the cows broke through the fence and got into the alfalfa field. In the morning they were lying in the field bloated. Their stomachs were big mounds, and the hair on their sides looked like grass on a steep hill.

The neighbors came with their remedies. One with a sharpened metal tube which he stuck into the paunch to let the air out. Another with a small hose which he covered with grease and inserted into the anus. Another with a solution of soda and soap which he made the sick cows swallow.

The boys watched the men working on the bloated cows. Soon they wanted to help. But the men would only let them work on one they already had given up for dead. One boy pulled the tail. Another pulled the tongue. The others ran and leaped onto the swollen body. Jumped on it. Kicked. Fought for a place on the top.

The men pointed and laughed at the boys' foolish efforts. But then the cow exploded, belching and farting and coming back to life in gusts of hot alfalfa fumes. Leaping to its feet, bucking and throwing one of the boys into the air. Then it stood there looking mixed up, shaking, and letting the boys stroke its back and rub its ears.

The boys and cow stood there a while, looking at each other, and the boys almost cried at the sight of this resurrection.

Then the men reminded them to go to the house and wash themselves so that they would not smell of it in school.

## WHO KEPT HER HAND IN HER POCKET

There was a lady who kept one hand in her pocket. When she was in the garden, weeding, one hand was hidden in her pocket. When she was feeding oats to the chickens, she scattered the grain with one hand and kept the other in her pocket. In church. In the store. Wherever she was, one hand was always in her pocket.

The boys wanted to know why this was so. They asked people, but no one else knew either. So they made a plan, a trick to make her pull her hand out. They decided to lay a string where she walked and trip her with it as she passed by. When she was falling, the hidden hand would leap from the pocket to keep her from striking her face on the ground. Then they would run out to help her get up — but really to get a look at the hand.

They started talking about what they would see. Surely it was more than a withered hand. The lady must be hiding something better than that. A large, black pearl, one of them guessed. Or a rose carved from ruby. Or something so pretty that they would never guess what it was.

The boys laid out the string one day, but when the lady passed by, they weren't able to pull it and trip her. They got too scared thinking that if they saw what the lady had hidden, she might give it to them. And if it was as beautiful as they thought, they might have to walk around the rest of their lives too with one hand in their pockets, hiding what they had discovered.

From then on, when the lady walked by, the boys only watched, feeling a little afraid and uneasy.



## THE BOYS GO TO ASK A NEIGHBOR FOR SOME APPLES

When the boys went to one neighbor's farm to ask him if they might pick some of his apples, they could not find him anywhere. They went to the house, and then to all of the buildings and called for him. They checked the machine shed to see if the tractor was out. It wasn't.

They started looking behind things — behind the pig troughs and cattle feeders, behind the fences and wagons. Finally, when they crawled over some hay bales in the barn — in a very dark corner of the barn — they saw him. He was praying to his animals.

On his knees with his hands crossed on his lap. Praying to a piglet, a dog, a cat, and a bull calf. He had fed each of them their own kind of food, so they were content as he prayed.

He was saying, Little animals with four feet on the ground, teach the rocks to lie in their places, tell the oceans never to rise and the mountains never to fall. Little ones, give your gentle ways to me.

The boys slipped away and went to wait in the yard. When the man came out of the barn, they asked him about apples.

The man brought a large basket to the boys. They could fill it with the ripest and largest apples from his trees. Not only that. They could keep the basket to carry feed to their animals.

BURIAL MOUND

*(Seven thousand years ago: an ancient  
burial mound, three hundred boulders  
sunk in sand above the holy body.)*

All that's left is the red ochre, and it's spreading. Spirals and blood; what twists to be born, falling flat, with a sacred stone between the legs. That's how we left you, like that. And down so far that you wouldn't hear us when we left for the winter. But then, what's there to hear? Snow settling, sleet chewing the apples, the ground catching you in the frozen corner of its arm. You think of light, caribou, or of wetting your lips. You wonder if anything is left. Some morsel the fingers might feel for in the sand.

## COUNTING THE YEARS

Where blood is a rock too big to understand. Ball of the foot.  
Or your fist, that jellyroll of sorrow. This is the eviction  
notice. The body's overflow. Someone says: there now,  
there now, there. But the blood is biting, it's biting through.  
You're trying to say . . . But there now. Go easy. Spit on  
your shoe. It's what you know that resists you. Even after  
all these years. Stray bone in the throat. A ring of keys at  
the waist. All those sons and daughters, blindworms or sea-  
ware. Something that's in your eyes, making them open and  
shut.

## AFTER THE RAIN

We're heading where the light is draining. She says, so many potatoes the farmer left behind. With the right words the water-holes will spit them up, the bare-headed leftovers. She's not afraid; but she's careful, especially after the rain. So we carry our shoes and find potatoes with our toes. The mud full of little tongues washing our ankles. She stays in one place, near the road. Her dress must be shouting as it flaps in the wind. So what. The farmer never even sees us; never hears the crackling of our bags.

SLEEP

If you *must*, then touch it. But only with a long pole of exhaustion, only if you're wrapped in grey feathers. Wear them like a cloak as you enter the valley, otherwise, you are trespassing. If you expect sleep, like a huge elephant or oak tree, to take you on: you'll see an elephant dancing on a toothpick. Expect lightning, and a small luminous insect arches, back and forth, across a black sky. Expect revelation, and your thoughts swarm up in a smokescreen.

But wear grey into the valley, lie quietly under the oak: you will be taken to a river you can slide deep into, given the stone of a dream that will never rise up.

## NOCTURNAL

If, some night, you wake up afraid:  
take a long walk into the country.  
Think about children lying awake, loud houses.  
Think about incessantly buzzing wires.  
Think about speeding cars that swipe  
every bit of light, and leave you with darkness.  
Think about the bullfrog's croak  
that cuts off as you approach.  
Think about the dog shadows bounding up,  
growling at your feet.  
Think about the heart of the growl,  
steel black and ruthless as your own.

These are the elements of the river.  
The one you stare into when the shotgun  
fires and your head hangs down. Now,  
think about the star on that river,  
the star in the sky.



NIGHT POEM

There is nothing to be afraid of,  
it is only the wind  
changing to the east, it is only  
your father      the thunder  
your mother      the rain

In this country of water  
with its beige moon damp as a mushroom,  
its drowned stumps and long birds  
that swim, where the moss grows  
on all sides of the trees  
and your shadow is not your shadow  
but your reflection,

your true parents disappear  
when the curtain covers your door.  
We are the others,  
the ones from under the lake  
who stand silently beside your bed  
with our heads of darkness.  
We have come to cover you  
with red wool,  
with our tears and distant whispers.

You rock in the rain's arms,  
the chilly ark of your sleep,  
while we wait, your night  
father and mother,  
with our cold hands and dead flashlight,  
knowing we are only  
the wavering shadows thrown  
by one candle, in this echo  
you will hear twenty years later.

I SEE A WOMAN

1.

I see a woman,  
looking toward me  
out of the shadow of a summer hat

I see the dogwood behind her  
I see their knobby trunks

children rush by on bicycles  
water spouts from a fountain

these things I see will stop for nothing,  
and a bronze statue is torn down

at my feet,  
ants go by carrying ant corpses

on a hand held out to me  
I see sunlight and leaf shadows,

and an open card —  
that's my marvelous future  
written there

2

I see a woman,  
my grandmother

I see reptiles that died out ages ago,  
their huge, clear eyes

. . . the sail of a boat underwater,  
rocking in the tide as it sinks

. . . imperial guards lined up in rows,  
their singing skeletons

. . . a stony hill that's plowed and planted  
and the same hill after a fire

blood rising in a cheek  
open flesh

in the midst of the holiday crowd  
I see Medusa's neck

3

I see a woman,  
she was my sweetheart

living hearts  
balanced on teetering scales

the shrill call of a child  
selling papers around the corner

things that couldn't be caught —  
I see uncountable faces

film that fades  
the choochoo train that overtakes the horse

angels caught and pinned like bugs  
martini glasses lifted up

a turning record,  
. . . a faint scratch there

4

I see a woman,  
my wife

I see tears that well up slowly  
. . . half transparent milk squeezed out

. . . a wide back  
soft cotton, that pulls apart

. . . hard ripened berries,  
and the same berries in a childish sketch

I see all this  
and myself, who won't see it twice

the polished corridor  
flees like a snake

in the hot shower,  
suddenly,  
approaching lips

5

I see a woman,  
my daughter

I see a navel shaped like a question mark  
. . . fine hair of an earlobe, and the helpless light  
caught in it

in the creases of her white clothes  
a dawn that will not dawn

blood oozes out,  
wants never to be healed

deep dust on the surface of the moon  
a lake dried up

a wide forehead against the sky  
love like a tossed stone

I see things I'm not allowed to see  
. . . tender, submissive face



6

I see a woman  
Mother

a blue jar,  
blue as the sky beyond the glass

sheet music opened up  
candlelight on the chords,

and a broken pearl necklace  
icicles hanging from water pipes

I see an infant being slapped  
a blackboard that won't erase

ocean waters overflowing  
hundreds of poems

I see my father shouting in the dark  
I see myself being born

I see a woman  
myself

I see the faces piled on mine  
I see where flesh goes, the hidden passage

the images I patch together,  
almost whole, are a joke

the press of warm buttocks against old beds  
for as long as you live

a hot forgotten towel  
on a path that winds from rock to rock

a book nobody has read  
a gleaming kitchen with no one in it

the underside of a ragged blanket  
. . . a priestess in a trance

*translated by Carol Tenny*

CHARLES WRIGHT AT OBERLIN

*In November, 1976, Charles Wright spent a week at Oberlin as part of a series of residencies sponsored by Oberlin's Creative Writing Program and supported by the National Endowment for the Arts. At two evening seminars with students and staff who had been reading his work, he responded to both general and specific questions. Discussion centered on Bloodlines (Wesleyan, 1975) and on the nearly completed manuscript of China Trace (Wesleyan, 1977), which he had shared with us in a mimeographed version. This is an edited transcript of the proceedings.*

*We began by suggesting that Wright say something about himself and his background.*

Well, I was born on the 25th of August in 1935, on my father's birthday, in Hardin County, Tennessee, in a place called Pickwick Dam. I was, I've been told, the first person born in that town. My father worked for the TVA at the time as a civil engineer, a construction engineer. I lived there for six months, a year, something like that. If you have read a poem called "Delta Traveller," I talk about it a little in the first stanza. Then we moved to Knoxville, Tennessee. My father was with the TVA for ten years. Eventually we ended up in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, when I was seven. We lived in Oak Ridge during the Second World War. After the war we moved to Kingsport, Tennessee, where we stayed. It's in the upper wedge of Tennessee, eight miles or so from where the Carter Family lived, all-time great American poet-singers. They're from Southwest Virginia, outside Gate City, which is right across the river from Kingsport. Anyhow, I grew up in Kingsport from the age of ten on, went to Lincoln Grammar School, the then John Sevier Junior High, and then one year of public high school. In the tenth grade I was sent to a school that had eight students, a place called Sky Valley, outside Hendersonville, N.C. My last two years of high school were at an Episcopal boarding school with the unlikely name of Christ School, in Arden, N.C., known to its students as "Jesus

Tech." Both these schools, Sky Valley and Christ School, made profound impressions on me and gave me a lot to write about later, mostly in *Hard Freight* and *Bloodlines*.

After high school I went to Davidson College, which turned out to be four years of amnesia, as much my fault as theirs. Probably more. Then I went into the Army for four years, three of them spent in Italy. This is the most boring biography I've ever heard. Well, the second most boring.

After the Army I went to the University of Iowa for two years. Oh, this is ridiculous. I did grow up in East Tennessee and Western North Carolina, which had a lot to do with my poems. Place has a lot to do with everyone's poems. I now live in California in a little town called Laguna Beach, and have lived there for the last ten years. It's a good place for a writer because it's so boring there's nothing to do but write.

My biography is pretty much the biography of almost everyone here. We all pretty much come from some layer of the middle class, we all grew up, lived in this country. I happened to be in that place and you were probably somewhere else. We all went through more or less the same things. I discovered poetry when I was sitting under an olive tree, like Ferdinand. Or was that a fig tree? Anyhow, it's true. I got interested in poetry rather late in my life. I was a history major in college, for reasons I'm still unsure of, and which were probably wrong. Amnesia period. My mother used to date William Faulkner's brother. She used to date Dean, one of Faulkner's two brothers. Dean was the one who got killed in a plane crash. He was an early aviator, back in the twenties. She dated him when she was at the University of Mississippi. She went out to Faulkner's place about sixty times and she never saw him. Every time anyone came out there he hid behind the barn, and that's where he stayed when any visitor came unless it was somebody he had to see.

I suppose my original impetus for writing came from my mother because she was, I started to say, a failed writer,



which, in a sense, I suppose she was. So she tried to encourage writing in me. It didn't take hold until very late. Until I was in the Army, though I had tried my hand at some stories while at Davidson — the less said of that the better. Anyhow, I was given a book, *The Selected Poems of Ezra Pound*, when I was living in Verona, Italy, and I was told to go out to Sirmione, on Lake Garda, where the Latin poet, Catullus, supposedly had a villa. That's the legend, anyhow, and it doesn't matter if the legend is true or not, it should be, like all legends. It's still one of the most beautiful places I have ever been to, or expect to go to. Lake Garda in front of you, the Italian Alps on three sides of you, the ruined and beautiful villa around you, and I read a poem that Pound had written about the place, about Sirmione being more beautiful than Paradise, and my life was changed forever. No kidding. I was at that time twenty-three or twenty-four. You can't get more romantic than that, can you, unless you're Gauguin?

I went to Iowa when I was twenty-six. I didn't even know what an iambic pentameter line was, so Iowa was good for me. It may not always be good for everybody, but it was good for me because I didn't know a damned thing. I even got in because I applied in August and no one happened to read my manuscript. So I shut up for two years and listened. And that's my bio.

*Did you have any teachers during that time, the Iowa time, who meant a lot to you?*

Donald Justice and Paul Engle were teaching there at that time. Justice had a major effect on my life. For several years, everything I knew about poetry I knew through him or because of him. He was an incredibly fine teacher and poet. He still is. And I was very fortunate, I feel, to have started out with him instead of someone else, because the things he taught me about language and style and care and precision are things you really have to learn first, and not pick up later on, as you probably *won't* pick them up later on as you might, say,

pick up other things that become necessary. Because I'd started in the middle, don't you see, and had to begin back at the start. And Justice knew what the right tracks were. Actually, the best thing that happened to me was when I went into the Army. I signed up for the Army Language School and learned a little Italian and got sent to Italy for three years. It cost me two years of my life but it has repaid many times over. I lived in Verona for three years, a beautiful city; I discovered poems there, and painting and eating well and, indirectly, it got me to Iowa where I got serious about writing.

*Have you been back to Italy since?*

Yes, for a year. I was teaching at the University of Padua, in 1968, and I lived in Venice. It's only about a twenty-five minute drive from Venice to Padua. I lived in Venice for a year and I benefited from it greatly. It's everything everybody has always said it was, unique in the world, absolutely gorgeous, just decadent enough for me.

*Did you write about Venice while you were there?*

No, but only because I tried desperately not to. It's like writing a poem about snow while the snow is falling. You try not to. I did write one poem in Venice that was sort of watery. No, that's not true, that's not true. Now that I think back, I did write a couple but not as many as I could have. I wrote a poem called "In the Midnight Hour," a Wilson Pickett title. What was that? "In the Midnight Hour"? Yeah, "In the Midnight Hour." I also wrote a poem about Frederick William Rolfe, "Baron Corvo," who was a fascinating Englishman. The rest of the poems I wrote there really didn't have that much to do with Venice as such. But I've written a lot since then that sort of seems influenced by the city. In a way, all the poems I've written since then have been influenced by Venice to a certain extent. There is a connection, a lushness connection, in my mind between my East Tennessee foliage and the Venetian leafage, gold leafage, that seems to have



stayed with me ever since, and it keeps coming out in my poems. And the presumptuousness of Venice and the sumptuousness of Venice have somehow sneaked in. I tried to knock some of it down but it kept coming back. I think Venice has a lot to do with — now, now this is terribly embarrassing for me, sitting up here talking about how my work is changing, my work has done this, how my work has done that, so please bear with me — I think it did, the city I mean, have something to do with how, as they say in music, I went up a step. I picked it up a step. From “streamlined” to a somewhat lush energy. It had to do with Venice and it had to do, as I’ve just mentioned, with reaching back into my childhood, as it were, a place called Hiwassee, North Carolina. Which is where a poem called “Dog Creek Mainline” came from. It was a place that was carved out of the wilderness, another one of those TVA dams. A type of back wilderness that is very lush and large and that encroaches on you continually. There was, and is, some strange balance for me between Italy, and Venice especially, and the wilderness of East Tennessee and western North Carolina. I still haven’t figured it out completely. I haven’t got it straight, but it keeps on coming up.

*I’m really curious about Pound. I’d like to know how you’d suggest reading him and how valuable he was to you in terms of your work.*

Apart from my teacher, an influence that everyone has to some degree or other, there have been two major influences on my work. Pound was one and a man named Eugenio Montale was the other. Pound was a tremendous influence, he was the first poet I ever read seriously. I think if the first poet you read seriously is a good or a great poet, then you’re stuck with him forever. I figure I got lucky. I think he really had the golden ear. There’s no doubt about it: everything they say about his ear is true. Everything they say about his politics is also true. They were very bad. I’ve been teaching for ten years, and I’ve never had the nerve to try to teach

his poems. He was such a learned man. At least, he knew a little about a lot of things. And he knew a lot about some things. He's easy to read if you've read all the books that he's read and have remembered the same things from them that he did.

*You've read all the books that he's read?*

I have not. I have read some of them, but that's probably the real secret, I think, to understanding Pound. Or some of him, anyway. It also helps to know a little bit about Yugoslavian money and hieroglyphics and things like that. John Espey, a Pound scholar, said he knew that the Cantos would never be finished when the hieroglyphics began to appear. Pound's son-in-law was an Egyptologist, and Pound, I guess, just couldn't resist getting them in. Probably a hook-up with his beloved Chinese ideograms. The early Italian Cantos I know more about because I did live in Italy and I did go to the places and there are a lot of places he mentions that you can make little pilgrimages to and they sometimes help explain the text. When you go beyond that, you have to get into Jefferson and Adams and American history and then you have to get into money and usury and its history in Europe and then you get into China and Confucius and ideograms and the Pisan Cantos and on down the line into and through various *reprises* and restatements in *Rock Drill* and *Thrones* and the threads keep shuttling back and forth. It also helps to know about Gavin Douglas and Social Credit, which I don't. Well, in short, it helps to be a Pound freak, and to be interested in anything he did, just because he did it.

*How about Montale and his influence on you? Did that come through translating his poetry?*

Well, he taught me a little about Hermeticism, which I'm not at all sure is a good thing, but I am (was) fascinated by it. Hermeticism is a kind of poetry I don't *think* I write. I try

not to. But the way he went about writing his poems when he was in his "Hermetic" period made him able to write hard-edge images, a type that Italian poetry hadn't seen much of before and hasn't seen much of since, though I am no expert on Italian poetry, I assure you. And if you're able, I think, to get out of the hermetic mold and to still keep the vividness, the freshness, the newness of the imagery that he was able to write because of it, then I think you can learn something, and I think I was able to learn a lot from Montale. As in most translating, I think that the translator is the one who gets the most out of the translation, no matter how good the translation turns out to be. The reader of the translation is not going to get what the translator got out of it, even though he may get a lot.

*Did you ever work with Montale?*

No. My Fulbright was to study and translate Montale, Cesare Pavese, and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Pavese I couldn't meet because he had crossed over, and Pasolini I was uneasy about meeting for various reasons. He wanted to meet me in the Forum one night at ten o'clock, and I didn't want to do that. Montale I was embarrassed to meet because I felt that his English was better than my Italian, as he was a great translator of Eliot and people like that. So I just cowarded it out and didn't, but I did work with people who knew him when I did the translations, and who were in contact with him. So, no, I never met him.

He was called "Il Taciturno," Montale, and he really doesn't like to talk very much and I can certainly understand that. So I didn't want to disturb him. Also, he lived in Milan and I was living in Rome. Still, I should have gone up. I handled Pound equally brilliantly. I'd follow him around for days in Venice. I'd even follow him to his restaurants. But I could never just walk up to him and say "hello." Anyhow, what are you going to say to a man like that, "I like your poems"? What are you going to say to a man like that when you know



he's not going to talk to you anyhow, because he doesn't talk to anyone but Olga Rudge? I did have it set up to meet Pound, though, at the end of my year in Venice. Jim Tate and I — he was over visiting on his way to England — had an appointment one week to see him. It had been set up by someone I knew in Venice, through Olga Rudge. And two days before we were to meet him, he went back to Hamilton College to get his honorary degree and that was that. I had another chance through a friend of mine, Desmond O'Grady, an Irish poet who used to be Pound's secretary, but I was in Rome when O'Grady came to Venice. This really isn't a good answer to the Montale question, because you'd have to be able to read Montale and be able to see what steals I've made and used. I feel I did learn something about how to manipulate lines. How to move a line, how to move an image from one stage to the next. How to create imaginary bridges between images and stanzas and then to cross them, making them real, image to image, block to block. And compression from Pound. Condense, compress. And those are the two people who do those things as well as anyone.

*The "Mottetti" must be one of your favorite Montale poems; maybe you should say what that is.*

It's a group of twenty poems. Not only that, they're the first things I ever translated by him. The twenty poems are twenty love poems to an unnamed woman, and I still don't know her name, even though I studied with a woman when I was at the University of Rome when I had my Fulbright who had been working on Montale for about twenty or thirty years, something you don't do with an existing writer in Italy, you have to wait till they are very dead. But she had been doing this and she still didn't know the woman's name, but she said she was a Canadian whom Montale had had an affair with, even though he was very much in love with his wife, too. But these Motets were to this particular woman, and they were love poems. Neither of my twenty-part poems are love poems but, yes, twenty became a number, a magic number for me,

because of the Motets. I think the Motets are fantastically performed. They are also discrete poems. Each one exists in itself, whereas I should like to think that my twenty-part poems are single poems, or rather that one is a single poem and the other is a sequence. The first Motet is a great poem. They are all short, I don't know what the longest one would be — fifteen, sixteen, seventeen lines, something like that. They were, as I say, the first things I translated. Then I translated an entire book called *La Bufera, The Storm*, which, strangely enough, has another twenty-part sequence called "Flashes and Dedications," which are travel poems about places in England, the Middle East, about different places in Italy.

*There seems to be an important formal precedent for you and others in Montale's sequences.*

It's a different kind of idea of a sequence. I gather M. L. Rosenthal is writing a book on the sequence in modern American poetry. His theory is, I think, that the sequence is the modern answer to the long poem and he's probably right. I guess they do hook together. It's wonderful to see Pound's attempt at this, which comes from Dante. You see something in the first two or three Cantos and then you see it in the one hundred and whatevers too. I mean he keeps going back and forth, Pound does, even though he says, "I cannot make it cohere," he's probably right, in the end, when he says, "It coheres, all right, even if my notes don't cohere." That's an approximate quote. It all cohered in his head somehow. It's the fourth anniversary of his death today. He died on the first of November, "Tutti Santi," All Soul's Day. There are recurring themes, and threads, let's say threads. It is a grab bag. It's the most beautiful grab bag in every sense. I believe Pound will be the chapter headings, and not the footnotes, of this century's poetry in English. I think he's probably our most important poet, but I have been wrong before. He has stuffed our grab bag century the way it is, fragmental and

disorganized and cruel and with great flashes of beauty, the same way his Troubadour century was, his Dante century. He is our "broken bundle of mirrors."

*Could you talk a little more about Hermeticism?*

Hermeticism meant a poem that was almost impossible to penetrate the meaning of. I don't think it was ever true. Oh, it may have been temporarily so at the time they were doing it, during the thirties or the forties. In the same way, those things may not seem tremendously hermetic now. We make associations now, as readers, more readily and without so much fuss. And if we can come to think in associations, then we won't have to worry about strict logic, and Hermeticism will be clear as air. But that is originally what it meant. It probably also had something to do with Mussolini and disguising what you were saying. It became sealed, hermetically sealed.

*I notice you use a lot of words that either are made up or are very rare. Even in the ones that are made up it's almost impossible to mistake what you mean. What comes to mind is the word "shevelled"; as far as I know that's not a word.*

Everyone knows what "dishevelled" means so "shevelled" would mean the opposite. That's the kind of word I'm interested in making up. I always try to be as clear as a lake. And even though I do have this business in my system now, that's still what I always try to do, be clear.

*Which business?*

This language business, you know, you have got to try everything that's available to you. I'm extremely interested in sound at the moment. I'm not interested in a flat line, or the flat language that has been fairly popular in the last, say, ten to twelve years. One person writing it extremely well,



(maybe two or three, and everyone else writing it extremely poorly. But I really like sound. I like musical sounds a lot.

*Which sounds do you like?*

(Oh, lots of sounds. Not noise, sounds. Mostly I like the sound of words. The sound, the feel, the paint, the color of them. I like to hear what they can do with each other. I like layers of paint on the canvas. I also know after I'm tired of lots of layers on the canvas, I'm going to want just one layer of paint and some of the canvas showing through. But I'm not quite to that point yet. I'm still trying to do whatever I can with sound. My mother's family is all very musical. Everybody could play something, except me. I was the only one who could play nothing. If you notice the dedication in *Bloodlines*, it's to my brother, Winter Wright. I don't know if they are famous enough for you to know them or not, but Johnny and Edgar Winter, the rock musicians, are my first cousins, and that whole family is musical, they all play something. Edgar plays everything. But that's where this sound thing comes from, I guess; I take it out in words. Repressed music. My father's family can't even carry a tune. Somehow I was the one of them that shook loose. I wanted to play the banjo, not write poems.

*Do you think you can trust the musical impulse in poetry?*

(To a certain degree, yes. You also have to be careful it doesn't overwhelm the poem. I'm a fan of Father Hopkins, Gerard Manley Hopkins. Sometimes I think his sound patterns are so strong that you miss what he is saying. And what he's saying is about as crucial a thing as you can say. But his sound patterns are too strong. My favorites are the Terrible Sonnets, where everything seems to fit together just right, even though some of the more Baroque poems, like "Spelt From Sibyl's Leaves," are among his greatest.

*In your long poem "Tattoos," do you think of the notes as if they were another section of the poem?*

No. I would have given anything not to have used the notes but I also wanted it to be very clear that each one of these was an actual situation, that it had not been made up but had actually happened, that it became a psychic tattoo in my life that would always be with me. I knew that later I would write something that would be conceptual, that I was going to play off the conceptual and theoretical poem against "Tattoos," and I wanted the actual thing to be as specific as possible. That's why they have dates on them and that's why they have notes. I thought that if I didn't, the hook-up would be lost. The reason I put them at the end of the poem instead of at the bottom or under the title of each one was that I also wanted the reader to go all the way through and try to figure out what was going on and then when he came to the notes say, "Yeah, they really are real things. Let me go back and read it with that in mind, and then read them again." And, as I said, "Skins" was conceptual. I wanted to balance it, and "Skins" is about such things as truth, beauty, the eventual destruction of the universe, metamorphosis, that kind of thing. They are supposed to be abstract and musical against the actual.

*Were you able to plan "Tattoos" before you wrote the individual sections?*

To a certain extent. I didn't know what I was going to write about. I didn't know what the situation would be. I just knew it was going to be a situation. I wrote the first one, the one about the camellias, reminding me of the Mother's Day business with the red rose and the white rose. That started me back into that whole period of my life. I wrote another one, and I kept thinking, or trying to think, of things that had made a great impression on me over the years. And some things go back to when I was five years old.

I didn't have them all in mind when I wrote the first one. Particularly the one about the janitor. I hadn't remembered that in thirty years. Another thing I did was I played nothing but country music on the radio and record player almost every day for six months while I was writing the things trying to put myself back in that time period, because that is what I grew up listening to.

*Was there a connection between the snake-bite section and the blood-poisoning section?*

No, it wasn't a bite. I didn't get bit. It was just something I saw. A snake-handling ceremony. That's what they do. The blood poisoning, that was a nail in the foot. For some reason the nail went in the foot but the blood poisoning was in the arm, and my brother somehow got blood poisoning at the same time and his came out of the stomach. He was swaddled up on the lower bunk of a double-decker bed. I was six and he was four. He had these big towels around him and I had my arm out also got up in wet towels. I don't hear of anyone having blood poisoning anymore, probably because of penicillin. Before the war we had sulfa, but penicillin came out after the war and that probably would have gotten rid of it. Now that's a memory of when I was six from when I was thirty-eight. I was six when this happened and both of my parents were dead by the time I wrote the poem and I have to say, "was it really like this?" That's how I remember it, but who knows? Now I do know the hallucination was there and I know that thing was rigged up for my arm and I know the double-decker bunk was there. I think I stepped on a rusty nail. I know the blood poisoning was in my arm. The point of all this is that anyone can pick out twenty incidents in his life and do that. I would like to think there are at least twenty that one will never forget. I tried to pick from the ones that seemed important enough to make a thread go through a single poem. Whereas "Skins" is not a thread, it's a ladder. I'll read one of the "Tattoos" and if



there are no questions I'll read the second one and then go for three.

Necklace of flame, little dropped hearts,  
Camellias: I crunch you under my foot.  
And here comes the wind again, bad breath  
Of thirty-odd years, and catching up. Still,  
I crunch you under my foot.

Your white stalks sequester me,  
Their roots a remembered solitude  
Their months of snow keep forming my name.  
Programmed incendiaries,  
Fused flesh, so light your flowering,

So light the light that fires you  
— Petals of horn, scales of blood —,  
Where would you have me return?  
What songs would I sing  
And the hymns . . . What garden of wax statues . . .

—1973

Obviously this is a set-up poem for what's coming after. Where I used to live in Laguna Beach, before I moved this summer, there is a giant camellia bush. I mean a *giant* camellia bush. I mean as big as from that couch to that couch. Every February it would come into bloom and drop its blossoms. This is what started the whole poem. The dropped flowers, red and white. Thinking of St. Paul's Episcopal Church. What song would I sing? What garden of wax statues? "Programmed incendiaries" because they're programmed to fall off as soon as they bloom. Thirty-odd years because I was thinking back to when I used to do my church number. Should I go on? This next one was written about the death of my father in 1972.

The pin oak has found new meat,  
The linkworm a bone to pick.  
Lolling its head, slicking its blue tongue,  
The nightflower blooms on its one stem;  
The crabgrass hones down its knives:

Between us again there is nothing. And since  
The darkness is only light  
That has not yet reached us,  
You slip it on like a glove.  
*Duck soup, you say. This is duck soup.*

And so it is.

Along the far bank  
Of Blood Creek, I watch you turn  
In that light, and turn, and turn,  
Feeling it change on your changing hands,  
Feeling it take. Feeling it.

—1972

My father's favorite expression when I didn't understand something was that it was duck soup, incredibly simple. That darkness is only light which has not yet reached us, I understand, is a physical fact. That is what's happening. There is light coming behind all the darkness if it ever gets down. Not in our lifetime. For my taste, now, it's a little too metaphorical in the last stanza. I don't think I'd write it that way now. Blood Creek is a renaming of a creek called Reedy Creek in Kingsport. Which on one side was the country and the other side was more or less town. "Blood Creek" is too metaphorical, I think.

*So that's an exception? Most of the place names are actual places?*

Almost everything. All of them have references in my life to real places. Real things.

*Why the crab grass in the first stanza? And what is the nightflower?*

There is a lot of crab grass in the lawns. Crab grass is very big down South. I don't know if it's as big up here. If you can't get the crab grass out of your lawn, the lawn gets eaten up by crab grass. My father's mature life was one continuous battle against crab grass and rose diseases. Crab grass is almost indestructible. You can't stop it. It's something small.

Nightflower is a metaphor. The death flower, and one wishes one had not said it three years later. But that's the story of almost everything. One tries to be as exact as possible at the time. I believe in trying to combine passion and exactness in language in poems and it's always hard to do. It's easy to be passionate or it's easy to be exact. If you're just exact it's boring, if you're just passionate it's formless, and probably boring too. If you can get the two together, you've got something memorable.

*How do you react to poems after you finish writing them as opposed to later on?*

I'm like everyone else — they're always better right after writing them. I'm not too embarrassed now, I guess, because I do think "Skins" and "Tattoos" are probably the two best poems I've done up till now. I don't think "Tattoos" is as ambitious as "Skins." But taken together, I think they are very ambitious. Too ambitious for what I was able to handle at the time, or might ever be able to handle. I also think that if you don't try to write something that you can't handle, then there is little point in it.

*Something to do with satisfaction?*

Yes, I feel some satisfaction in them. I wish they were better, but I feel more satisfaction about these two poems than anything I've done up to what I'm working on now.

*What would you change in those poems?*

Nothing, probably, because at the time that was the best I could do. And I disagree with Auden, presumptuous as that is. I don't think you should keep going back and changing and changing stuff that you wrote when you were thirty when you're sixty. You've become a hard-line Anglican, you used to be a Socialist. I think that's foolish. He wants us not to have "September 1st 1939" because the line "We must



love one another or die" is false: we're going to die anyhow. Well, sure, but how can he deny us the poem when he's already given it to us? He can't do that. Well, of course, he can, he did. I mean he tried to. No, I probably wouldn't do anything better. This is even better than I could have done at the time. It's like when you're playing pool and you're doing fantastically. Everything's dropping. You're playing so far over your head you can't believe it. And in certain moments in "Skins" I think I was over my head. There were certain moments when I found my level, too.

*Did you have any sections that you left out of "Tattoos"?*

Yes, I did. Five of them. I didn't have any from "Skins" that I threw out, but I had five from this one. There were several that I considered writing about and didn't. Reasons now I'm not sure of and they may have fitted into the scheme just as well as these do. But at the time I didn't think so.

*You say you wrote the first one first (but the others are not in chronological order) and that gave you the five-line stanza. Was that comfortable to work with?*

It was very comfortable and that's why I changed it in "Skins" to one fourteen-line stanza, it was so comfortable. I'd used it a couple of times in *Hard Freight* and liked it. Three stanzas is a good form for me and fifteen lines is a good length for me. The basketball players all have their favorite spots on the floor to shoot from, so many feet from the basket. Well, I feel comfortable at fifteen lines or thereabouts. Also, three stanzas is good because you can present something in the first, work around with it a bit in the second and then release it, refute it, untie it, set fire to it, whatever you want to, in the third. And that's its main problem for me. I felt I'd explored enough of what could be done, so I changed it for the next poem. Unfortunately, I didn't realize until I was about halfway through that I was using what Lowell was using in his *Notebooks*. Of course, it's no more his than mine;

it's been around for hundreds of years. Still, his *Notebooks* was fairly current, and if I'd thought of that when I started I probably would have continued on with the five-liners, the three five-line stanzas. But these bothered me, in addition to what I've just said, because of *The Dream Songs*, which are in three six-line stanzas. You can't win. Whatever you do you can't win. To get away from this I went to that and found out I'd screwed up there too. Still, I do like them being different.

Shall I go on? This is the one about snake handling. It takes place outside of Asheville, North Carolina.

Body fat as my forearm, blunt-arrowed head  
And motionless, eyes  
Sequin and hammer and nail  
In the torchlight, he hangs there,  
Color of dead leaves, color of dust,  
  
Dumbbell and hourglass — copperhead.  
Color of bread dough, color of pain, the hand  
That takes it, that handles it  
— The snake now limp as a cat —  
Is halfway to heaven, and in time.

Then Yellow Shirt, twitching and dancing,  
Gathers it home, handclap and heartstring,  
His habit in ecstasy.  
Current and godhead, hot coil,  
Grains through the hourglass glint and spring.

—1951

It helps to know that the configurations of the copperhead are dumbbell shapes or hourglass shapes. It also helps that a copperhead, even though poisonous, won't kill you unless you're already rather sick. It will sure make you sicker. I don't know why it won't kill you, but I've been told that it won't. Water moccasins, the coral snake, and the rattlesnake will kill you for sure, but a copperhead won't. It'll send you to the hospital, but it won't kill you unless you're in trouble anyway.

So most of the snakes that they pick up will be copperheads. But they pick up those big-ass rattlers too, and if they bite you it doesn't mean you shouldn't have, it only means that you didn't have enough faith. Also they stroke them when they pick them up, on the stomach, so as not to disturb the rather drowsy state they, the snakes, are in. The people believe that there is a passage in scripture that tells them they will handle snakes. Which is where godhead and that business comes from. If you believe enough you will be able to handle the snakes. Shall I keep on doing these?

Hungering acolyte, pale body,  
The sunlight — through St. Paul of the 12 Sorrows —  
Falls like Damascus on me:  
I feel the gold hair of Paradise rise through my skin  
Needle and thread, needle and thread;

I feel the worm in the rose root.  
I hear the river of heaven  
Fall from the air. I hear it enter the wafer  
And sink me, the whirlpool stars  
Spinning me down, and down. O . . .

Now I am something else, smooth,  
Unrooted, with no veins and no hair, washed  
In the waters of nothingness;  
Anticoronal, released . . .

And then I am risen, the cup, new sun, at my lips.

—1946

I don't know how many of you people are associated with the Catholic Church or the Episcopal Church, but it's practice not to eat before taking communion. When you're ten or eleven years old you're always hungry and you're always fainting at the altar because you're hungry. That's sort of what happened. Mr. Kent gave me the wine to bring me around. That's why the cup is at my lip because he gave me the sacramental wine to wake me up. It's in here not just because it's amusing that I fainted at the altar but because I think it's symptomatic of the sparring match that I had for about ten years with the Episcopal Church, in which I was



raised, in which I was tremendously involved for a short amount of time and from which I fled and out of which I remain. But it had a huge effect on me. If nothing else, from Sunday School I learned all those stories in the Bible which were very important and which I would never have known otherwise. It's a very strange thing about being raised in a religious atmosphere. It alters you completely, one way or the other. It's made me what I am and I think it's okay. I can argue against it, but it has given me a sense of spirituality which I prize. I just don't want it all so bleeding organized.

*Do you think that the ritual of the church has affected the sense of form in your poems?*

Yes, I like the ritual, that's the part I like the best about it. I think it has something to do with the form, the continuing formality that I find. I can't quite get away from a certain amount of formality in my work. I think ritual is a part of life, and here's a ritual that goes on in people's lives. There are people who wouldn't want that to affect their poems. I realize that, but, yes, it still does have an effect on my life, the ritual does. And I'm glad for it.

*Will you say something about how you came to write "Skins"?*

It started with those two lines in #1: "There comes that moment/When what you are is what you will be. . . ." Even though I had it in mind as an extension of, or continuation of, or an overlay to, the "Tattoos," even when I was still writing "Tattoos," that statement is what the poem itself took off from. Because I realized I had reached that point (I think I was thirty-eight), and by then — long before then — there does come a time when, as Metropolitan Life says, "The future is now." There you are. You are what you're going to be. One hopes one can make the best of it. Now, each one of these "Skins," just as the "Tattoos" did, has a very specific reference, although each one of these is, as I've said before, conceptual, abstract, and I suppose theoretical. And I

can give them to you if you wish. They are so outrageously pretentious that I didn't include notes for them. But just for the fun of it, I'll tell you what I had in mind. The structure of the poem is a ladder. Ten up, ten down. It starts at Point A, and comes back to Point A. Number 1 is the Situation: what you are is what you will be. After that, I said, what the hell, let's go for it. So this is the one in which I decided to really over-reach myself. Number 2 is Beauty. Number 3 is Truth. Number 4 is the Beginning and Eventual Destruction of the Universe. Number 5 is Organized Religion. Number 6 is Metamorphosis, in this case the metamorphosis of the mayfly. Numbers 7, 8, and 9 are the four elements and combinations thereof. 7 obviously is water; 8 is air/earth; 9 is earth/fire. 10 is the fifth element, Aether, the air above the air. The Greeks called it the fifth element. That's the top of the ladder. It ends with a colon, and then it comes back down. All of this is trying to make some sense out of one's situation. "Tattoos" was me in relation to the past. "Skins" is me in relation to the present. *China Trace* is me in relation to the future. There's the seed of a mad plan going on here. It is even more involved: *Bloodlines* is the center of the three books *Hard Freight*, *Bloodlines* and *China Trace*. "Tattoos" hooks up with *Hard Freight* and the past, and "Skins" hooks up with *China Trace* and the future. All three are supposed to work together in a smudgy sort of way and are part of an idea I started out with about seven years ago and that I'm just about to finish with in *China Trace*. . . . Anyhow, number 11 starts five poems of things that are rejected: number 11 is Primitive Magic. Number 12 is Necromancy. Number 13 is Black Magic. Number 14 is Alchemy. Number 15 is Allegory — all rejected. And then the next four are acceptances: and they are of course again what I've gone up the ladder with: earth, air, fire and water. Number 20 is the Situation again, point A. Pretentious, perhaps, reaching, surely, but I *was* trying to keep it all in terms of natural objects. Even though the situations and concepts are large, I hope the meanderings will come close to home. Now that



was the hardest to do in the five rejections, in the magic part; where you get into Alchemy. And in the one on allegory it's impossible to keep allegory from coming in.

*Would you go through from 11 on again?*

Yes. Number 11 is Primitive Magic. It's a matter of reverse signs. The first two lines set up the situation. The next six lines come from a documentary movie I saw on TV, the best one I've ever seen, about a South American Indian tribe, "The Tribe That Time Forgot." It's a description of some of the images in the film. The last six lines are my own. That's Primitive Magic. Number 12 is Necromancy, the summoning of and speaking to the dead. That comes from a book on magic and superstition, the title of which escapes me — it's a red and black book I read some four or five years ago. This is the way one was supposed to do it: you took this many paces, at that particular time, in that direction: straight description of how it was supposed to be done. Number 13 is Black Magic: the Hand of Glory is actually something in Black Magic, a hand, bones of a hand, and it was done in that particular manner. And all those things like man-fat and wax and ponie and sesame were all part of the ritual. Number 14 is Alchemy, that is, base metal into gold. Number 15 is Allegory, the seven-caved mountain and the serpent on the cross, all those things. The Slaughter of the Innocents, and so on. Echo is something I've used before: I used it in "Delta Traveller": it's another euphemism for Whatever's Out There . . . . In *China Trace* I use it even more: I get to the point of calling it a wind. It's just another euphemism for the word that no one knows. ~~Number 19 is Earth again, which is what I believe in, the earth.~~ Number 20 is the same situation I started out in. It's where I started out, the physical point, though that point is never the same. You have to say it's Point A, though Point A isn't Point A again after you've left it. But it's not Point B either, or even Point A and a half. I suspect that "Skins," and "Tattoos" as well,



is overwritten to a certain extent. It's a lushness I used because the book concerns my background. A growing up that I consider lush, one that really prepared me for nothing except imagination. And the whole book was rather like going into the dark and the unknown and making a lot of noise against the darkness and scaring away the evil spirits to keep up your own courage. Like that. I can write as flat a line as the next guy if I want to. And I've done so, and not always on purpose. Also, I think of my growing up in this way because in East Tennessee and western North Carolina the landscape was always bursting out. Or at least it is in my memory. It was jam-packed full of leaves and trees and flowers and all that. This isn't something one has to know, but it was on my mind when I was writing the poems. In *China Trace* there are several alliterative, lushy kind of poems. Again, they are the ones that seem closest to my past autobiography, rather than moving away from me toward my future one.

Once you get into it, you try to get away with as much as possible, but still trying to stay accurate, still trying to have passion and intensity and accuracy at the same time. There's an indefinable line where you start being sentimental instead of having sentiment, where you stop being lush and start being sloppy, where instead of being the transmitter you become the transmitted. You tend to overflow, and I don't believe in overflowing in poems at all. I hope there is a lushness in these poems that does not overflow.

*In thinking about China Trace, and in taking sections 1 and 20 of "Skins," that is, the Situations, it seems to me that China Trace is a pilgrim's book. In the sense of what has happened in "Skins," and the way that the voice is a consciousness, or that you oriented yourself to the present, and then returned to the situation, and this seems to be a kind of journey, trip or movement. It's really not answered in any of the poems that come after "Skins." But it seems that China Trace comes out of that need.*

It does. At least, I meant for it to take off from "Skins" instead of, say, the last three poems in *Bloodlines*. It was the one of the three books, as I said, that was supposed to relate to the future. Of course, one can't really write about the future. But it also might be called *The Book of Yearning*. But, then, any book could, I guess. In a way it's another parabola back to Point A, but it wants to act as a parabola on to Point B. . . .

*It seems that the yearnings that are in "Skins," although they're different from the yearnings in China Trace, are not entirely different. It's the same process of those yearnings, those desires, whatever journeys are entailed in going up and down the ladder; that that activity is a way of reaching out while you're still, necessarily, in the situation. It's a way of reaching out, and then making a union of those things, that's an almost impossible union. It's a way of understanding that I think's looked for in China Trace.*

Yeah, I think so too. I should back-pedal, and say that I don't think *China Trace* is quite as yearny as "Skins" is. It's called *China Trace* because it's an attempt, or a hope, to write a book of Chinese poems that don't sound like Chinese poems and aren't Chinese poems but are *like* Chinese poems in the sense that they give you an idea of one man's relationship to the endlessness, the ongoingness, the everlastingness of what's around him, and his relationship to it as he stands in the natural world. I'm trying to talk about things that I don't know anything about, because I haven't been there, in terms of something I do know something about, because I'm standing in the middle of them. This is, of course, hardly an intellectual breakthrough, but it's been workable before. Whereas in "Skins" it's all more theoretical and conceptual. *China Trace* is really more down to earth, even though it might look more cosmic. That's why there are so many dates, hours of the day, phases of the moon, all of that business where you locate yourself in a particular time and place and are sort of just washed over by the complete everlastingness of it all,

that feeling that everyone feels, and has been feeling ever since we stopped beating with sticks on the ground. *China Trace* is a more ambitious book than *Bloodlines* is, as *Bloodlines* was more ambitious than *Hard Freight*. An increase in intensity all down the line. It's also more ambitious in that I'm trying to do all this with everyday objects. At one time I was going to call the book *Quotidiana*, which is the title of one of the poems in the book. The first half was at one time called "Colophons," re-doings of themes I had tried in the first two books. The second half was to be called "Medallions" and would take off in the direction in which I hoped to move. They still work in that way, the two sections, but they're not titled anymore.

*There's a journal-like quality to many of the poems, and I'm interested in whether they're arranged in chronological order.*

They absolutely are, with perhaps one or two exceptions in each section. It was conceived of as a book from the first poem on, even though each poem is discrete, I think, and has its own entity and doesn't have to depend on any other, as most of the "Tattoos" do and all of "Skins" does. But it was conceived of as a book in the way that *Bloodlines* was. Now all this structure and intertwining isn't of itself necessarily good, but there it is, and it runs through the three books. Obviously I didn't know, back when I got going on *Hard Freight*, that I was going to write a book called *China Trace* that was going to be made up of poems all twelve lines or less, which is, in fact, what I've done. I did that because *Bloodlines* is a book of ten poems, two of them very long, and the first poem I wrote after finishing it was a short poem, "Childhood," the first poem in *China Trace*. So I decided, rather arbitrarily, that no poem was going to be longer than twelve lines. In the first section I wanted to have an example of each length of poem from one to twelve lines but I *couldn't* write a four line poem. It was the hardest thing. They always came out sounding like a stanza that needed another stanza, or two



more stanzas. I finally got one, entitled "Guilt," in the second section. And so I do have an example of each of the twelve line lengths in the book, if not in the first section.

*There's something I wanted to ask about when you were beginning to talk about Pound as an early influence. Or how that influence has carried over into this book, what you wanted for the character of the poems, the sense of emblem or the sense of sign. Because it seems to me that the language seems always to be trying to break into a third dimension, always trying to become very graphic, very physical, in the way that the Chinese characters are.*

Well, I know nothing about Chinese ideograms, but I would hope that some of the language would be compressed enough, vivid enough, so there could be some kind of transference, transferral, between the words. I don't know enough to even talk about that. I know that I agree with Pound: it must be a wonderful way to write, to be able to see, physically, what you're saying. In one poem, the title, "Spider Crystal Ascension," is supposed to be ideographic. The title is three separate words that are supposed to give you an idea of what's coming in the whole poem. I did have the idea of compression, which is maybe as close as we can get to the ideogrammic method. To compress the language and the thought to such a point that it stops being small and starts to enlarge. I don't quite know how to explain this, but it gets past a certain point, and goes out the other side and gets larger. It expands. Which is to say, rather than writing a lot to get larger and larger, you write less and less. And I don't mean Concrete poetry. I don't mean Imagism, though there is an element of that. Just regular writing, imagery and metaphor, compressed to such an extent that it goes out the other side. That is so theoretical I can't back it up at all, but it did seem possible to me. Again, that's one of the reasons I wanted to write very short poems. The black hole might be an example. In the black hole, as I understand it, the gravity is so great that it pulls everything in to such an extent that

light cannot escape and has to exit out the other side. And that there is possibly another universe back there. You could take a handful of matter, if it were possible, from a black hole and stand up out of your chair and drop it, and it would go right through the earth.

*Is that going on in the whole book?*

I hope it's going on in both halves. The second half is certainly getting down to the nitty-gritty of my wishes, which would be to be saved, but there's no such thing. I keep trying to say that all the way through, in different aspects, in different guises, and in the last five poems I say it even more so. The last poem ends up with the person of the poems, who is most often called "I," but sometimes "You" or "He," as a constellation in the sky. That's as close as he gets. Cut up in little stars. That also contains, of course, an allusion to Verona, Italy, which is the place where I first began to read poems, and where I first began to try to write them. It's what happens to Romeo, right?

*Why is it that you use the epigraph twice?*

Well, for one thing, I've never seen it done before, using the same epigraph for both halves of a book. And I wanted to make sure it wasn't forgotten by the time you got to the second half. I knew the second half of the book would be very different from the first half. In tone, density, imagery, and even in language, I knew the second half of the book would be different. Otherwise there seems little point in doing fifty of the poems, you'd just do twenty-five of them. And I wanted to make sure that the reader caught that the same things are going on in both halves, but that the second half is also very different at the same time. I wouldn't have done it if I didn't think there was a real reason behind it. It wasn't just to be cute.

Could you talk about the poem "January"?

Well, I wrote it in Iowa City. And it was colder than hell. I don't know what to say about "January." This may sound presumptuous, but I think the poems in *China Trace* are extremely self-explanatory. In a way that "Skins" and "Tattoos" may not be. I don't know what to say about "January" except that at the time I wrote it I believed the first stanza very much. I believe it because, in some other life, the face I look on I won't be able to recognize, because it's going to be a leaf or a piece of grass. Or it's going to be a rock or dirt or something. It's not going to be anything I would recognize because it would be insens . . . insensate. . . .



*You won't have a nervous system.*

Yeah, right, I won't be able to figure it out. "Snow" sets up what I really believe in the book. And I think that all the poems, in various disguises, show it all the way through the book. Coming back is something we don't know about. The last three lines in "January," the spider is "he" because the spider is usually "she." Black widows, one always thinks of. This is a black widower. I was just trying to reinforce what I said in the two previous books as quickly and as graphically as possible. Say what you have to say, then beat it. The one thing about *China Trace* is that I'm extremely emotionally involved in all these poems, to the extent that I'm putting it right out there for anyone who wants to see it. It's what I think. I'm saying it again and again, obsessively, as I tend to do. I'm still so close to it I can't judge it, but I'm sticking with it to the end.

*I'm very fond of the poem "Indian Summer."*

"Indian Summer" — I was working with statement a lot, flat statements, not metaphorical statements, and I wanted to make up a word, so I made up the word "shevelled," which



I'm very fond of. Poems that are neat and orderly are shelved.

And "Captain Dog"?

Captain Dog is what some of my students used to call me about eight years ago. And "dog" keeps popping up in these poems. "Captain Dog" is a poem of process, which explains itself and its processes as it goes along. Jump-cut. Jump-cut is what each stanza is doing. There's no logical movement from stanza to stanza. And dog because a dog is a dog. And a Captain Dog is pretty high up in the hierarchy of dogs, I guess. There is also the reverse spelling of dog. . . . I have always been very fond of the phrase Captain Dog, and I like titles with dog in them: *Andalusian Dog*, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*, *Dog Yoga*. . . .

What about the vision of death in "California Twilight"?

The poems can be mutually exclusive, as I've said. Things are dead, but there are processes in the book by which things change: once you're dead you become part of the natural process, which nourishes other processes, and ultimately a bat, e.g., would have partaken of something you were. Water or whatever. I could explain it logically in that way. But I also believe that whatever's dead stays dead, in the shape, form, or body that that creature had. And I am not talking about reincarnation at all. At all. At all.

Would you say something about "Nerval's Mirror"?

The person in the poem is the speaker, not Nerval. The "I." And the mirror means that he was not mirroring what had happened to Nerval. That in Nerval's mirror you had to be Nerval to see what he saw, naturally. It takes more than trappings and emulations. Nerval was an incredible spirit, who really was mad, and he wrote this beautiful prose piece

about walking up to the stars. "Aurelia," it's called. And I think I meant in the poem that this is the mirror image of what would happen to the "I" of this book *now*, were he to try and be Nerval. I meant for the title to explain why he says what he says. It was a reversal, as all mirrors are.

*There's a sense of witness: what the mirror saw. And that's a sense that runs through the other poems.*

Yeah, and it's what the mirror sees also in me, that even if I'm edgy and anxious, I'm safe and well-fed, and would probably not have the snap or whatever to make that break that Nerval did. And would never want to, not needing it because my cold nights are down here and don't have to be in the stars. There's a sense of an incredible vision Nerval had then that this person will never have. And from which there is no return. This book is for a condition of return. Or of staying here and not snapping. And the book is about not dying, right? All poems are about not dying, in a way. Shoring all these fragments against our ruin, as Old Possum said.

*Would you read, then comment on the poem, "Reunion"?*

Already one day has detached itself from all the  
rest up ahead.

It has my photograph in its soft pocket.

It wants to carry my breath into the past in its  
bag of wind.

I write poems to untie myself, to do penance and  
disappear

Through the upper right hand corner of things,  
to say grace.

This is the poem I expect to get the most flak about, for that transition in the second stanza, and for that bald statement. I meant the transition to be totally unexpected. This "I" is the most jarring and wide-gulfed transition in any of the poems. It's the closest I got to "salvation," since salvation doesn't exist

except through the natural world. In any poem, it's the closest I can get to making a hook-up with my religious background.

*Would you also read and talk about "Stone Canyon Nocturne"?*

Ancient of Days, old friend, no one believes  
you'll come back.

No one believes in his own life anymore.

The moon, like a dead heart, cold and unstartable,  
hangs by a thread

At the earth's edge,

Unfaithful at last, splotching the ferns and the  
pink shrubs.

In the other world, children undo the knots in their  
tally strings.

They sing songs, and their fingers blear.

And here, where the swan hums in his socket,  
where bloodroot

And belladonna insist on our comforting,

Where the fox in the canyon wall empties our hands,  
ecstatic for more,

Like a bead of clear oil the Healer revolves  
through the night wind,

Part eye, part tear, unwilling to recognize us.

"Stone Canyon Nocturne" is a central poem in the book. Stone Canyon is a canyon in Los Angeles. The poem contains things that I believe very deeply. At Stone Canyon, there's a strange physical sensation brought about by extra-bodily substances. There are fossils in the canyon which can come into your hands very easily.

*How close is China Trace to Bloodlines in its use of sequence?*

I wanted these to have a journal-like, everyday quality. That's not like *Bloodlines* at all.



*It's that sense of meditation, too, that's going through the book. It goes back to what I brought up about the first and last sections of "Skins," where the pilgrim asks what the point is, that the point is to still continue on and . . .*

I meant to say this when we were talking about "Skins" and the word "pilgrim" came up. At one time in the poem, almost every time you see the word "you," I had the word "pilgrim" in there. But it seemed too much like a minor league *Pilgrim's Progress*, so I took it out.

*Could you give a little information about some of the people mentioned in China Trace? For example, Lapo Gianni, Morandi, Chi K'ang, Dino Campana, Munch.*

Lapo Gianni was an Italian poet from the time of Dante. They sometimes do the names *al rovescio*, turned around, so his name might have been Gianni Lapo, as Gianni is a first name. He'd probably be almost completely forgotten, except for Dante and for one poem he wrote that has the line, "The Arno, fine balsam. . . ." And then the poem goes on to be this incredible fantasy, and says how he, Lapo Gianni, wishes all men could live together, and that they could all have enough money and that the roads could be free of bandits, and on and on wishing good things for all men in general. And this poem has kept him famous for six hundred years, and rightly so. I love this poem and the balsam line in particular. So I wrote a reply to Lapo Gianni.

Morandi, Giorgio Morandi, who's been dead for about five to ten years now, was an Italian painter and printmaker, mostly famous for his prints and paintings of bottles. Also for his landscapes, but mostly for the bottles. Still lifes. Chi K'ang was a Chinese poet. I read one of his poems in Arthur Waley. He said something about "the great light." So that's what the first line of that takes off from. "Signature" was supposed to be a kind of aphoristic, "Chinese" poem. The only one in

the book that was specifically thought of as "Chinesey." The title comes from something in Joyce about the signature of all things we are here to read. Dino Campana was an Italian poet, somewhat the Italian equivalent of Nerval. Not really, not quite as unbalanced, but he was in and out of institutions most of his life. He died in the thirties, I think. An Italian Romantic poet, with a big R. One of the few to bring the Italian literary language down and mix it up with everyday speech. He was a wonderful poet, very tender and tough at the same time. He wrote about Florence, the city, a lot. "Dino Campana" is a poem about solitude.

Edvard Munch was a Norwegian painter. That poem is about a painting — "Stormy Night" or something like that — about a woman in a white dress in front of the evergreens bending in a wind, and the light around this house is very opaque, with a lot of yellow light coming out of the windows. John Wieners wrote a long poem about Munch. And I'm sure John Ashbery wrote one too. "Munch" is a poem in the first section which, as I've said, retouches old themes and old styles. It is, to me, the least interesting poem, stylistically, and the least "new" of all the poems in the book. It's a type of poem I've done before, very one-two-threeish, very logical. Earlier, I wrote a lot of painting poems, especially in *Hard Freight*. But now I've been trying to write poems ("Munch" is not an example of this) the way a painter might paint a picture. I've been trying to use the lines that way, description, landscape. So I thought it only fair to write a poem about a painter. In this case, two painters, Munch and Morandi. After *China Trace* I think I'm going to try a longer poem trying to write sections the way a painter might interweave colors and techniques. I've got a painter in mind, but I'm not going to talk about it yet.

Could you talk about composition? Do some of these poems, the shorter ones, write themselves pretty quickly?

No, no. The one you don't have — the last poem in the book, called "Him" — took five weeks to write: it's eight lines long.



And I worked on it every day, threw out and added, threw out and added. Some have been quicker than others. The only one I've written in a day I wrote two days ago, here in Oberlin. Naturally they don't take as long to write as "Tattoos" or "Skins," but for me they're much harder to write than a normal, say, sixteen to thirty-line poem. Because one can get into an exposition there where you can cut and add and expand. There isn't an hour in the past two years and three months — even in the middle of my classes, when I'm teaching — it's terrible, I'll blank out and start thinking about the one I'm trying to write. The one-line poem was cut down from many lines, and took, oh. . . . I don't know. Most of the twelve-line poems started out as twelve-liners.

*Do you think you're using the line differently in this book?*

I think it's a longer, more relaxed line. For example, the line "All day they have known what we will know when the time comes." A much longer, flowing, less frenetic line. Also, the lines are physically longer. I'm trying to write longer and longer lines. The one I'm most proud of is a nineteen-syllable line that doesn't break down into smaller units. It's in "Spider Crystal Ascension." It's a longer, prosier line, but what I'm interested in doing is writing a long *packed* line, which is really next to impossible. But I figure if I can write the long easy line I can get to the packed long line. The line I do write, I think, takes off from the iambic base, stretching it or shrinking it in the way that Eliot spoke of when he talked about free verse. I count every syllable and every stress.

*You say you count every syllable and every stress. But at what point? Early on?*

Immediately. I'm always conscious of this. I can see a seven-syllable line through a wall. All my lines are extensions of seven-syllable lines, or contractions. I try to elude the stanza thing. Stanzas are so much of the retentive side of

my personality that I. . . . Of course stanzas are a great help a lot of times, but I try to stay away from them, and that's hard for me to do. Very hard. I don't like blocks in poems, I like breathing space. What I try to do is to get uneven lines in stanzas, which is also very hard for me to do as I tend to want to even everything up. I do try to use the white space of stanza breaks.

But since it is hard for me to avoid blocky stanzas in my poems, I've tried to use them as units almost autonomous in themselves. I did this mostly in *Hard Freight*, where I would write the poems in stanzas. That is, a stanza at a time, and only one stanza at a time, at the most two. So when I'd go to do the following, or next, stanza, some time would have passed, a day or two or sometimes more. And there would be some slight logic gap that I would try to retain, and so each stanza would begin to take on a little life and isolation all to itself, though, as it were, still plugged into the life-support systems of the overall parent body. I did this partly from the painter-idea I talked about earlier, using stanzas in the way a painter will build up blocks of color, each disparate and often discrete, to make an overall representation that, taken in its pieces and slashes and dabs seems to have no coherence, but seen in its totality, when it's finished, turns out to be a very recognizable landscape, or whatever. Cezanne is someone who does this, in his later work, to an almost magical perfection. I'd like to be able to write poems the way he painted pictures. And who wouldn't, you might well ask.

Oh, and another reason I started writing in that kind of stanza organization, or thinking in that kind of stanza organization, was the time element. I never seemed to have enough free time at a stretch for anything but them. It turned out to be a great blessing for me, I think, as it sort of forced me into this particular way of writing. I kept on with it in *Bloodlines*, but it's sort of petering out in *China Trace* as I get more and more interested in working with the line, and trying to use it



in the way I have been using the stanza. But that will be, if I can get it — the line — the way I want it, for the future more than now, even though, as I say, I've started tinkering with it in *China Trace*; it will be mostly for whatever comes after *China Trace*. And I love the space, the white space, in poems, and I've tried to use it more in *China Trace*. Space has everything to do with the line, it's what the line lives in and breathes in, if it is to breathe at all. Space, and the line in it, is what's starting to tweak me now. Space is what's always new, it's what's always happening. Well, this is long-winded and not exactly an answer to your question, but, yes, I do count all my syllables and stresses.

*And yet it doesn't take up the foreground of your attention as you write?*

I think it's something you just come to know, if you study meter or whatever. . . . If you're aware of it in the poems you read, and are conscious of it over the years. If you write enough, you just become aware of it. Some people have spent a lot of time trying to get away from that completely. And day after tomorrow I may decide: No more of that trash. But not yet. Mostly, it has to do with the "music" of poems, whatever that is. Everyone hears it differently, of course. I tend to work in stress groups. I am, like most people who write poems, inordinately fond of my own ear, and trust my ear maybe more than I should. As Woody Allen says, "It's my second favorite organ." (He was referring to something else.) I'm a primitive poet, I think. I trust my ear, I trust my instincts because I'm not particularly well-read or learned. The artist I feel closest to — though not perhaps the one I admire the most — is Henri Rousseau, *Le Douanier*, the French primitive painter, who found the entire jungle in his back yard. You know, he'd go down to the Botanical Gardens and draw all that. A very strange painter. I feel very close to him. He was a brilliant primitive. Which isn't to say that I am, but I feel close to him and not intellectual at all. I trust

my ear and instincts to make the jumps, what sounds right, the way someone who can't read music can play music. By ear. I'm trying to be very honest about this. I know someone's going to say, "Well, you got a poem by that Lapo Gianni fellow in there and I've never heard of him. . . ." Well, I've read a couple of poems too, but for the most part. . . .

You're very conscious of technical matters. Are you as conscious of content? Or is it a matter of "I don't know what I'm saying but I'm saying it . . ."?

No, I'm very conscious of it, particularly in this book. In fact, from the poem "Dog Creek Mainline" on, I've been very conscious of content. Before that, in *The Grave of the Right Hand* and the first third of *Hard Freight*, I was much more interested in just putting the poem together. Now I'm interested in putting it together the best and most interesting way I can and also saying whatever it is I have to say. Now, if that's "organic form" — which it isn't — or whatever, I do come out of a tradition. We all do. Eliot was right: you don't write in a vacuum. "Form follows function." "Less is more." "Form is merely an extension of content," all those things can be right at different times, maybe even at the same time. "Things go better with Coke." "Live free or die." "Bad money drives out good." They're all slogans. "No *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job." "Tempus fugit." "No ideas but in things." "Poetry is when it feels like the back of my head is coming off" (or words to that effect). "First thought, best thought." Slogans, all true and untrue at the same time. It's all in how you want to place, slant, or apply them. "Writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down." Well, come on now. Battles fought and battles won and battles lost and the war goes on between the language and the darkness and the light. I really don't think the content has to shape the form, and I don't think that the form necessarily shapes the content, though I suppose both can, and have done so in the past and



will in the future. And that's all right. I don't really think a poem's rhythms are completely determined by what you're saying. I don't see how that's possible. And I also see how it's completely possible. I don't think anything *has* to be doctrinaire. If it helps you, fine, but it may not help someone else, or may not even work. One quote I really like is by Philip Larkin, the English poet who works, for the most part, in rhyme and meter: "Form means nothing to me, content is everything." Maybe not an exact quote, but close enough. And I'm sure he means it. Fascinating. Two other quotes, slogans, which should settle the question, but won't, are both by Pound: "Only emotion endures" and "Bad technique is bearing false witness." Now I think probably both of these are true, but I do think one is truer than the other.

*There seems to be a contradiction. You're trusting your impulses, and yet fully conscious of what you're doing. You must surprise yourself sometimes.*

Well, that did happen in "Reunion." Yes, that did surprise me. That jump surprised me, and I kept on with it. But I guess what I'm trying to say is that once I get involved in what I'm doing, my instincts and impulses are going to follow what's the right thing. . . . I don't know what else to say. Obviously we manipulate. You have to manipulate if you're going to make something. All poems are made. They're not made in heaven, they're made on the page. Poet means maker, or it used to. But now we've walked in that door out of which there is no getting out of the room. You know, they've been arguing this ever since Lapo Gianni eyeballed the Arno, ever since Homer heard the Aegean. Form and content. What is one to say about form and content? We should call it "conformtent" and be done with it. It's like the weather: everybody talks about it, but nobody does anything about it. That's because there's nothing to be done about it. You write your poems in the way that best pleases you and that's all you can do. Every change in every doc-

trine is a temporary change at best, and at worst it's just blather. Just write in the manner that best suits you, Ginsberg or Wilbur, Justice or Creeley, Jim Tate or Jim Dandy: say what matters to you in a way that matters to you and that's about all you can do. Well, form and content. I admit that one manipulates, I admit that I have certain things in mind I want to say, but I still think I'm trusting my instincts in *how* I say it. . . .

*Does that influence how you revise?*

I don't know. I do cut lines out. When you do this it can change the shape of meaning. I'll cut a line out if it doesn't sound right, or if it'll make it sound better, closer to what I wanted to say and sound like. Sometimes you'll get really lucky and cut something out, to find that the jump has been made by cutting two lines out . . . that's what you really trying to say! I'll always cut if it doesn't sound right.

*Can you remember any changes you made in "Spider Crystal Ascension"?*

What I did was I got those first two lines, and held onto them for about four days, without knowing what to do with them. I was trying to describe the gigantic movement of the Milky Way through the Montana sky, as seen from a place twenty miles from the nearest house, absolutely pitch-black, when the Milky Way is an incredible thing, in the dark of the moon, radiating out, and it really does look like a spider. . . . I didn't know what to do with it. And then I got that long line — "All morning we wait for the white face to rise from the lake like a tiny star." That came from the ascent. But that still wasn't enough. I waited another couple of days, and I was walking along thinking about the poem and the phrase "And when it does. . . " suddenly came to me. That's my favorite part of the poem. "And when it does," what? "We lie back in our watery hair, and rock." That's what. You know we're down there too, and one of us is going up. . . . So those

five lines took about eight days, back and forth, back and forth, writing, crossing out, trying to get it to sound right and to say the right thing. I wanted the idea of being electrified up there, so I finally got "juiced." Then I still didn't have a title for it, so I decided to take the three biggest words in the poem and put them together.

I have something I want to read. A letter Rilke wrote to his wife about Cezanne. . . . "The convincing quality, the becoming a thing, the reality heightened into the indestructible through his own experience of the object. It was that, to him, that seemed the aim of his innermost work. . . . The painter, the artist, whatever, should not become conscious of his insight. Without taking the way around through his mental processes, his advances, enigmatic even to himself, must enter so swiftly into the work that he is unable to recognize them at the moment of their transition. For him, alas, to watch them . . . delays them; to him they change like the fine gold in the fairy tale which can no longer remain gold because some detail went wrong." That does not contradict counting syllables or anything else of that sort. One last thing I want to read is by Ambroise Vollard, Cezanne's friend and dealer. "Very few people had the opportunity to see Cezanne at work because he could not endure being watched while at his easel. For one who has not seen him paint, it is difficult to imagine how slow and difficult his progress was on certain days. On my portrait there are two little spots of canvas on the hand which are not covered. I called Cezanne's attention to them. 'If the copy I'm making at the Louvre turns out well,' he replied, 'perhaps tomorrow I will be able to find the exact tone to cover up those spots. Don't you see, Monsieur Vollard, that if I put something there by guesswork, I might have to paint the whole canvas over, starting from that point?'"



MOUNT CARIBOU AT NIGHT

Just north of the Yaak River, one man sits bolt up-right,  
A little bonnet of dirt and bunch grass above his head:  
Northwestern Montana is hard relief,  
And harder still the lying down and the rising up . . .

I speak to the others there, lodged in their stone wedges,  
the blocks  
And slashes that vein the ground, and tell them that  
Walter Smoot,  
Starched and at ease in his bony duds  
Under the tamaracks, still holds the nightfall  
between his knees.

Work stars, drop by inveterate drop, begin  
Cassiopeia's sails and electric paste  
Across the sky. And down  
Toward the cadmium waters that carry them back to the dawn,

They squeeze out Andromeda and the Whale,  
Everything on the move, everything flowing and  
folding back  
And starting again,  
Star-slick, the flaking and crusting duff at my feet,

Smoot and Runyan and August Binder  
Still in the black pulse of the earth, cloud-gouache  
Over the tree-line, Mount Caribou  
Massive and on the rise and taking it in.  
And taking it back

To the future we occupied, and will wake to again, ourselves  
And our children's children snug in our monk's robes,  
Pushing the cauly hoods back, ready to walk out  
Into the same night and the meadow grass, in step and on  
time . . .



RATES

A caterpillar, long  
beyond summer, crossing  
the blacktop  
east of Machias

*Copernicus Leonardo Luther*

a fingerling headed  
downstream, in  
an eddy

*Galileo Shakespeare Newton*

pinwheeling out in  
M-101, a white dwarf dead  
before history was born

*Bach Voltaire Diderot Hume*

the black mark spun  
through the meter down cellar,  
a bulb left on in the attic  
all winter

*Kant Mozart Blake*

forsythia, barely  
unfolded, out on  
the outskirts  
of Gander

*Darwin Marx Van Gogh*

a tern, its beak  
quick with herring,  
flying up through current to  
sun

*Freud Picasso Einstein*

a far gun: while  
smoke announces  
something has started, air  
withholding  
its tall report.

FLOCK

Twin-sistered by a woods road  
that sent twenty thousand to the trenches,  
Longstreet lost sight of his own right wing.  
Five men spotted a flock of chickens.

In the uniform of General Jackson,  
handwritten signs hung in silver  
a foot below their shoulder blades,  
retired police lieutenants

struck with dogs, veterans  
of the Red River campaign,  
and yanked a wedding license  
whose last justice of the peace

swung a cloak from his shoulders  
and married a hundred nineteen-year-olds  
in a front room, flanked by screaming eagles  
like a twice-doomed captain

petitioned by General Jackson  
for half an hour  
in the Brigadier's appeals to arms  
that took the form of prayer

like Pulpit Rock  
at twenty-four hundred feet  
carried in the charge  
of cavalry, the work of which arm

tore up whole clumps of trees,  
nineteen-year-old dogwoods  
taken by the throat  
like the couple caught by a brother

and as twice-doomed as Jackson's men  
in the care of a lieutenant  
shot in the back of the head.

White oak trees

lower their arms  
like the nineteen-year-olds  
married for one day  
whose apprehending officer

runs his hand across his eyes  
and spits, as taken by the throat  
as a dogwood that opens  
and fills from the top with wings.



## CHICKEN WINGS

You make one pass over the fields,  
wings on your disc harrow  
in mist as deep-dyed  
as Poliziano's Hymns

or the flushed neck  
of a drugstore burglar.  
You walk the fields  
white with flying chickens as wild

as Poliziano at the side  
of Homer's grave  
as if it were to break open  
like the wings of a chicken

or Poliziano's Hymn  
to Venus rising from the waves  
taken from the *Iliad*  
like the battle plans of Custer

who threw his arms around the neck  
of a brother officer  
in the field of open graves  
at Winchester, Virginia.

Flying in the fifteenth century,  
unclipped chickens  
soar with wings as deep-dyed  
as third-century Homeric Hymns,

or the white morning of Hole-in-the-Day,  
Sioux military genius  
lying on his face  
for ten days in the field

whose Confederate gold  
buys a disc harrow, pure white,  
with wings that fold over flat for transport  
and run the whole length of the side,

like the grave of Homer  
in northern Italy  
and frozen in late spring  
like a garden

or drainage ditch, the second  
that you dig in the field  
flocked by birds.  
You curb your dog, striped with gold bands,

ten yards to the north side  
of a Civil War grave,  
dogs as white-fanged as a chicken  
or the Italian Homer

whose blind bust burns like a star,  
a bust with the blood pressure of Custer  
or a drugstore burglar,  
arms like wings held in one place

by a plainclothesman's dog  
and a night guard, blind as Homer,  
who frisks the whole length of his side  
like a lieutenant  
of Poliziano's Aphrodite

or someone who'd take office in Detroit  
and who walks backward in the dark  
like a citizen  
or a veteran hymn-maker,  
Poliziano  
leaving Aphrodite to Homer.

WHY I'M NOT MAKING MY LAST TRIP NOW

I have nothing to bring  
except two empty hands  
that once were fists, eyes  
that see less each day, eleven  
teeth veined with silver  
and sadly spaced. My fear  
of water, my growing fear  
of high winds, of seeing  
the earth at great height  
and wanting to fall soundlessly  
through ages of cold air until  
I became cold air and no more.  
I have the 7 untested faiths  
of the believer. The first that God  
was born in January of '28  
while it snowed all afternoon  
on Pingree Ave. and my fathers  
roared. The last that you  
will believe me. How can  
I go without clean socks?  
(My aunt would not buy shoes  
without clean socks.) How  
can I enter the kingdom  
without a hat? How can I  
put my luggage in a wish  
and whistle the whole way?  
How can I make you understand  
I'm still foolish and I won't go!

## LITTLE BY LITTLE

Each year I tire a little more.  
In the impossible dawn  
of August the last cool  
of night air sighs. There goes out  
from me a groan that stops  
the mockingbird in mid-squawk.  
This will be the last year,  
it says, but I know otherwise.  
I know the price I pay  
simply to be. I have stood  
by the shore and watched  
the old men sail out  
in darkness, and I turned  
for home and a tiny bed.  
I slept while they saw  
dawn flood each others' faces.  
Later, I woke and dressed  
one foot at a time, brushed,  
and went down to the wharf  
to buy what I could. They stood  
to one side, silent, smoking,  
and still slowly rocking  
on the great pulse of ocean.  
Men with the faces of time  
and the bodies of boys,  
they sat now, legs apart, barefoot,  
their waists cinched by old ropes,  
and nodded closer and closer to sleep.  
They would die all at once,  
in a tangle of sails and black  
rushing overhead, they would  
go out like candles suddenly  
sucked up, while I gave up  
a finger one day, a tooth the next,



an ear and all it heard,  
a few hairs that moved the wind,  
an eye that made the hills rise  
in morning light. I would give up  
first your hand that rested  
on the back of mine, then  
the glass of water between us,  
the table where you sewed  
and I read. Finally, each word  
you spoke, and each shrug,  
our coughs, our names,  
our tongues, our questions  
and even the silence that dusted  
our eyelids as the answer,  
or rained in the streets at night  
while the sky bulked larger  
and darker toward morning.

TWO ALLEGORICAL FIGURES

Lady, haven't we met before?  
Aren't you the baker?  
Didn't you take me into your kitchen

and gather the slow sad dough,  
too stupid even to breathe,  
into white hills, coffins and domes?

It was you who bustled them into the dark  
ovens of great change.  
It was I who clapped for the sleepers

vested in crusts of gold,  
yet private as beehives and spare  
as a hermit's hut.

And that gentleman out in the yard,  
the chairman of sacrifice,  
he who breaks in horses and doors to rooms

we would never leave if he didn't  
carry the walls away: it was he  
who broke bread, still warm,

the butter undone at one stroke,  
the mild flesh coming alive in our mouths,  
honored at last in its own kingdom.

## THE GENEROUS BODY

Body makes things  
to give away: milk teeth,  
too tiny. It tries again.

Hair also it gives,  
strand by strand,  
and it charges nothing.

What can be done?  
Ruined by losses,  
it remembers its mother.

She does not turn her children away!  
It arrives at the sea  
littered with shells, bones,

and the slow, blind stars.  
Into her lap it drops  
everything.

## THE PHOTOGRAPHER GIVES THE MOON A DARK ROOM

The moon carries a black box  
strapped to her back which she  
turns on me.

Still, I leave her my room.  
I open the window  
and close the door.

When the moon flies in  
I hear her running water  
and opening her box.

Someone is taking baths,  
one after another.  
When I take out my dirty

pictures, showing her  
self as a new moon,  
she stops singing.

I turn my head.  
What is that pulse,  
that music too far

for the tune to carry,  
like a grand ball  
on the other side of the water?



A MAN IN THE STREET

And one day there is the man  
lying in the street who won't get up.  
You don't know him,  
but he means more than bone and muscle  
shining in the cold October air.  
And you don't have to look  
as you pass by to see his eyes  
stilled and blank with wonder.  
That final confusion is yours  
and will be always at times,  
though you'll forget it as you've forgotten  
the first time love struck you dumb.  
And that day you won't notice,  
as you pass by, how he gets up  
out of his bones and falls in step  
behind you.  
Unknowingly you have inherited his desire,  
and it is your desire that leads him now.  
With each step someone gets up,  
someone falls.  
With each step you lift the earth  
and all its dead.  
And one day a woman smiles,  
laughs softly, and puts an arm around your hips.  
It's so simple.  
You fall in love again.  
It's so simple, you are confused and dumb.

## THE LIGHT

*for my brother,  
Kevin Woodman*

Before the first light  
touched the river  
the rose bush,  
pressed against the window,  
was the silhouette of a man in rags  
looking in  
between night and morning.  
It was morning. And this  
a way of saying, look child,  
the world is more than you suppose.  
Get up get out there  
get down to the river  
and take this little bit of night  
with you  
so you may better understand  
what's coming.  
Be there when it first shines  
on the water, on the black noses  
of the deer as they bow to drink,  
on the smooth skin of the frog  
whose voice is so much bigger  
than its body. Watch  
for the steelhead working purposefully  
toward the high pools, and notice,  
at the edge of the gills, the sickles  
of shine, all those moons  
that have fallen into the sea,  
coming back, and the tracks  
the raccoons left  
filling now with light.  
It was the day before you were born.  
I got up

and left the house in a hurry,  
my dreams unresolved, my shoes untied.  
We called the house La Casa Contenta,  
the road, gravel, the pines, Ponderosa,  
the dog, Rodrigo, and you,  
you didn't yet have a name.  
Even your anatomy was a secret  
as you kicked in the wilderness  
of a woman's belly  
sensing, as you must have, the change  
that was coming.  
I was eight years old,  
everyone was worried,  
mother was almost forty,  
and you were late.  
But you were strong  
and healthy from the start.  
When she brought you home  
and handed you to me  
I held you, my brother, carefully,  
wrapped in a cotton blanket,  
your eyes shut tight, your fingers  
sifting the air, and your silky hair,  
that patch of black  
you brought with you  
into the world, so black  
and shining with the light  
we live by.

## CONTRIBUTORS

MARGARET ATWOOD, the well known novelist and poet, is the author of *Surfacing*, *Lady Oracle*, and *You Are Happy*. She spent a week at Oberlin last April on an NEA residency.

PHILIP BOOTH writes us that he has been reading science and philosophy, and writing new poems, in Maine.

DEBRA BRUCE has published poems in *The Iowa Review*, *Seneca Review*, and other magazines. A chapbook of her poems is scheduled to appear soon from Burning Deck Press.

LINDA GREGERSON is currently a graduate student at Stanford.

JAN HAAGENSEN's book, due to appear soon in the Cleveland State University Poetry Series, has a wonderful title: *Like a Diamondback in the Trunk of a Witness's Buick*.

We are always pleased to have translations of ZBIGNIEW HERBERT's work. The two poems in this issue date from 1956 ("Ardenne") and 1961 ("Box"). Their translator, JOHN PIJEWSKI, was born in Boston, and learned Polish from his immigrant parents. He also writes poetry and recently won the Grolier Poetry Prize. This fall

he is teaching at Boston University.

The short prose pieces by JIM HEYNEN in this issue will be part of a collection titled *The Boys*, to be published early in 1978 by Gray Wolf Press (Port Townsend, Washington). He is spending the year in England as a Visiting Fellow at the University of East Anglia on a U.S.-U.K. Writing Fellowship.

DAVID HUDDLE teaches at the University of Vermont. A book of his short stories, *A Dream with No Stump Roots in It*, was published by the University of Missouri Press in 1975.

MARK JARMAN teaches at Indiana State University in Evansville. He has made several appearances in *FIELD* and has new work appearing in *The Iowa Review*, *kayak*, and *Poetry Northwest*.

PHILIP LEVINE's new collection, *Milkweed*, is due from Atheneum this fall. In January he will publish a selection of the poetry of Jaime Sabines, translated in collaboration with Ernesto Trejo (Twin Peaks Press, San Francisco).

*The Afterlife* (U. of Iowa), LARRY LEVIS's second book, won the Lamont Award. This fall he will be doing a one-week



residency at Oberlin, under a grant from the NEA.

ANNE MARIE MACARI, a recent graduate of Oberlin, is living in New York City, where, among other things, she is at work on a novel.

STEVE ORLEN's book, *Permission to Speak*, will be published by Wesleyan in the spring. His last chapbook was *Separate Creatures* (Ironwood). He lives and teaches in Tucson.

Also in Tucson this year is GREG PAPE, whose book, *Border Crossings*, will appear from Pittsburgh Press in the spring. This fall he is working part time for the Arizona Poetry-in-the-schools program.

LESLIE RONDIN has just moved from Cleveland to New York, where she is looking for a job. These are her first published poems. Last year she shared Oberlin's Academy of American Poets Prize with Beth Tornes (see below).

TANIKAWA SHUNTARO (b. 1931) is a contemporary Japanese poet who has published several collections of poetry, the best known of which is *The Solitude of Two Billion Light Years*. He has also written essays, and poetic dramas for radio and television. Tanikawa visited

the U.S. in 1966-67 on a Japan Society Fellowship. His translator, CAROL TENNY, is an Oberlin graduate who has spent a total of eight years in Japan.

BETH TORNES' name will be familiar to FIELD contributors who remember that she was our editorial assistant last year. After winning the prize mentioned above (see RONDIN) she migrated to California, where she writes that she misses Ohio in the fall.

NANCY WILLARD is well known to our readers for her poems in FIELD and elsewhere, and her other kinds of writing — fiction and children's books — as well. This fall she will be touring on the Ohio Poetry Circuit.

CHARLES WRIGHT's residency at Oberlin last fall, which produced the interview in this issue and saw the completion of his newly published *China Trace* (Wesleyan), is warmly remembered here. Readers who want to explore his difficult but rewarding trilogy (*Hard Freight*, *Bloodlines*, and *China Trace*) should find the material in this interview invaluable.

C. D. WRIGHT lives in the Arkansas Ozarks. Her first collection, a chapbook, *Alla Breve Loving*, was published by Mill Mountain (Seattle) in 1976. *Room Rented by a Single Wom-*

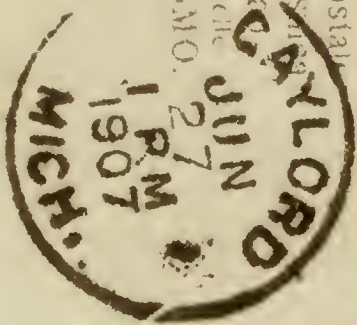
an is due sometime this fall from Lost Roads Publishers, Frank Stanford's press in Fayetteville.

None of the three Wrights in this issue are related to each other. The third, FRANZ WRIGHT,

has work appearing this fall in **kayak** and **Grove**. A chapbook of translations (in collaboration with Beth Tornes) is due out later this year from Pocketpal Press.



Postkarte — Carte postale — Post card — Cartolina postale  
 Briefkaart — Brevkort — Correspondenzkarte — Dopisnitsa  
 Dopisnice — Karta korespondenciina — Levelező-kártya  
 Unione postale universale — Weltpostverein — Unión postale universal  
 Tarjeta postal — Cartão postal — OTKRYTOE PISMO



*Harold Ford*

*Mrs. Grant*

*Longview*

*Misses*

P.F.  
 No 6283  
 No 6286 Relief